VISIT…

Agitator.

The Cinema of Takashi Miike

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1. The Dirt Bike Kid

Takashi Miike was born on August 24, 1960, in a countryside town on the outskirts of Osaka called Yao. The town was a rowdy, working class area with a large immigrant population, which mainly consisted of Koreans. The Miike family originated from the Kumamoto region on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. Before and during World War II, Takashi Miike's grandparents had been based in China and Korea (his father was born in Seoul), but they returned to Japan when the war ended, settling in Osaka.

Miike's father was a welder by trade, his mother a seamstress who also taught her craft in a small school she ran by herself. His father spent much of his free time gambling and drinking, typical interests for working class men of his generation.The image of masculinity provided by his father held an attraction for the young Takashi, whose working class roots resulted in an upbringing that was far removed from any form of culture. Miike senior was a regular visitor to the local cinema, but didn't take his son until Takashi was a teenager. They went to see Steven Spielberg's *Duel*.Takashi Miike later developed an avid admiration for Bruce Lee, the only person of which he professes being a true fan.

Takashi Miike, age two, on his mother's lap. Clutching a gun..

All photographs in this chapter courtesy of Takashi Miike.

A Japanese cowboy.

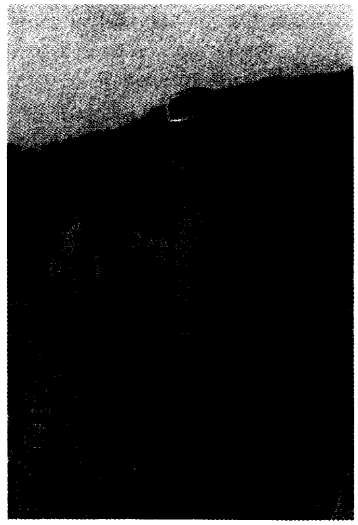
As a boy, Takashi spent much of his time playing with animals. Blowing up frogs with firecrackers was a particularly favourite pastime. In junior high he picked up rugby, which he played for three years until he went to high school and an interest in pachinko[1] and motorbike racing took over. He became part of a group of friends who all shared a passion for racing motorcycles. Accidents inevitably happened, some of them lethal. "You would be talking cheerfully to one of your friends before a race and several minutes later he would be dead.Two or three people would die in bike accidents like that every year."[2] The loss of so many of his friends was an experience that shaped him. "I lost much, but at the same time I would experience many emotions from constantly being so close to death. Just after an accident you feel fear and you sense the danger of what you're doing. But probably because we were so young, after one week we would really start to miss racing. When I got back on my bike on those occasions, it would be twice as exciting as normal."

There was one guy in the group whose racing skills were far above those of the others. When this person became a professional, Miike realised that becoming a professional racer would be an unachievable goal for him: in a professional race on the Suzuka circuit, he watched his talented friend struggle in the back of the field, achieving a result that was average at best. "Twice I tried to race my bike on the circuit myself. Not in competition, but just to try it out. It was really difficult. You need all your concentration just to handle your bike, so actually overtaking someone is almost impossible." Miike changed his plans and aimed to become a mechanic instead, hoping to at some point join a racing team. But he realised another thing about himself, which was that he lacked the will to make an effort to study. Particularly the math and physics that were required for a mechanic in training.

Now out of high school and with no ambition to further his education, he was left with only the adolescent desire to escape the clutches of his parents and lead his own life. Some of his friends had opted to join the yakuza, whose presence in this working class area was a part of everyday life. "It was quite normal for people to have a yakuza member in their family, a father or brother for instance." But Miike felt that even becoming a gangster required too much effort.

The opportunity to leave finally presented itself quite by chance. "I was listening to the radio one day and by coincidence they played a commercial spot for the Yokohama Hôsô Eiga Senmon Gakkô [Yokohama school of broadcasting and films], which said the school had no entrance exams and that basically anyone who couldn't get into university could enter. It really sounded like the ideal chance to escape home and do nothing." Aged 18 he left Osaka to study at the film school founded by renowned director Shôhei Imamura. With

his parents paying for part of his tuition, Miike settled in a small apartment in Yokohama and found a job in a night club called Soul Train. The club was frequented mainly by American GIs on leave from the military base in nearby Yokosuka. "It wasn't a real job to me. It was a disco and I got the chance to talk to the black soldiers and listen to the music. It was fun, a lot more fun than the school, in fact." In his first year of film school he attended only the first two months. The second year he only attended two classes. "On my first day at the school, the teacher wrote on the blackboard: 'The screenplay is art'. I thought: 'What kind of place is this?' It was so far removed from what I knew, like these people came from a different planet."



Playing with animals: five-year old Miike meets the local wild life.

It was at one point in his second year in Yokohama that the school sent him off to work on the production of a television series. A representative of the production company came to the school to look for a student who would work as an assistant for free. Since all the other students were busy shooting their graduation films, the school decided to sacrifice the one student who never attended classes. Literally plucked away from his part time job, Miike found himself an unpaid production assistant on the set of the television series *Black Jack*[4]. "Most of the crew on those TV series were salaried employees of a production company. They had union rules to make sure they didn't have to work too many hours. After they went home, us freelance people would have to work really hard to make sure the production finished on schedule. The regular crew were normal people who had finished their education and were doing this as a job. Those people and the movies they made were completely uninteresting. What they wanted most was to lead comfortable lives, not to create something special. When I realised that, it really put me off ever wanting to work as an employee for a production company."

The restrictions on employees' working hours meant that there were many jobs available for freelance film crews, and Miike continued working on the production of television dramas like The Hangman, G-Men and *Tokuso Saizensen* [lit: Special investigations unit frontline]. Many of these series were produced by film studios and motion picture production companies and over the years Miike developed a strong dislike for their employees and for the film world in general. "We had to work so hard as freelance crew because the regular crew didn't want to work in the daytime. And despite the fact that they didn't have any talent they were very arrogant. So I would make it a matter of principal to not work in film and stay in television."

For nearly ten years he continued to work as a freelance crew member on television dramas, at a pace that he professes nearly did him in. he took an average of forty to fifty jobs a year, working in various guises but gradually climbing up the ladder to the position of

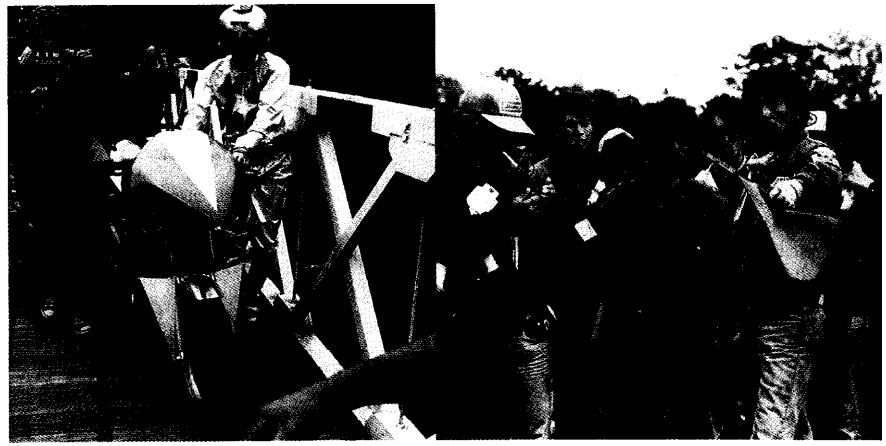
assistant director. But even for someone who had an almost militant pride of working in television, the TV world started to lose its lustre. "After ten years in television I had come to realise that the creation of TV dramas didn't allow for much creativity. I worked for many interesting directors who had made some very peculiar films, like Yukio Noda, but when they worked within the confines of a television series the results usually weren't so special. In cinema you had the chance to create something particular and unique. I thought it would be an interesting experience to work on a project like that, with a director who was trying to put his own vision onto film."

That director would be none other than Shôhei Imamura, the dean of the film school which Miike had hardly attended. For his 1987 production Zegen, Imamura was looking for three assistant directors to complement his regular crew. Takashi Miike started work on his first film as third assistant director. After Zegen, he continued to work in film, as assistant director to Toshio Masuda, Shuji Got6, Hideo Onchi and Kazuo Kuroki, some of whom he

Left: On his first film, helping out the costume department of Shôhei Imamura's *Zegen.*
Right: On the set of Imamura's *Black Rain,* with two extras.

had previously worked for in television. He would work with Imamura again two years after Zegen, on the Palme d'Or winner *Black Rain* (*Kuroi Ame*). It would also mark Miike's first appearance in front of the camera: he played a factory worker in two scenes (for more information on Miike's acting appearances, see chapter 5: Stray Dog). By 1991 he had climbed up to the position of first assistant director, on Hideo Onchi's *Shimantogawa.* It was the last film he would work on in that capacity.

Around the late 1980s and early 1990s Japan's bubble economy, the ever-expanding economic growth the country had experienced since the end of World War II, was at its peak. The amount of money available for filmmaking had increased thanks to the involvement of outside businesses. Companies that had no experience in filmmaking were willing to invest



Left: Miike's knowledge of motorcycles came in handy while working as assistant director on *Kono Ai No Monogatari* (1987).
Right: With the crew of *Kono Ai No Monogatari.*

serious sums of money in film production. Most tried to get a piece of the fledgling market for straight-to-video films, which had exploded in 1989 when Tôei released Crime *Hunter* (*Crime Hunter – Hikari* No *Jôdan*) on video with great success. Realising they had struck gold, Tôei started producing films solely for the video market under their V-Cinema banner. Other studios and production companies followed suit and started their own line of made-for-video films, mostly action films with a dash of sex and/or comedy modelled on Crime *Hunter.* This wave of straight-to-video film production, known as original videos (OV) or more commonly as V-cinema (the Tôei moniker quickly came to represent the entire phenomenon), offered chances for new directors to emerges. One of those new directors was Takashi Miike. "To these new, inexperienced companies, established film directors seemed too arrogant to deal with, so they would ask the assistant directors to direct films for them." A company called Vision Produce asked him to direct *Eyecatch Junction* (*Toppû! Minipato Tai – Eyecatch Junction),* a comedy about policewomen in leotards who defeat criminals with gymnastics. "It was a new experience to actually direct a film myself, so I agreed."

During pre-production, two months before shooting on *Eyecatch Junction* was to commence, Vision Produce asked him to replace director Toshihiko Yahagi on an action film entitled *Lady Hunter (Lady Hunter – Koroshi* No *Prelude).* Setting a pattern for his later career, Miike shot the film within the two-month period before filming on *Eyecatch Junction* was scheduled to start. Though released on video two months after his official debut *Eyecatch Junction, Lady Hunter* was Takashi Miike's first film as a director.

Themes in the work of Takashi Miike

In trying to interpret the films of Takashi Miike, it is tempting to start from the premise of his work as genre cinema. After all, his films would seem to be quintessential examples of genre filmmaking and in the first six years of his career as a director Miike worked almost exclusively in the V-cinema industry, which is predominantly genre-based.

However, the director's position in relation to genre cinema is an ambivalent one. Miike maintains that he is not at all concerned with genre when making a film, that whichever genre his film ultimately belongs to is for others to decide. Although many of his films can be classified as being of a specific genre, it becomes clear when watching them that they rarely adhere to the rules of the genre and the expectations the viewer has of it. Take Dead or *Alive* for example. We could classify this as a yakuza or gangster film, but the film's finale would seem to have more in common with science-fiction than with the gangster genre. Likewise, *Audition* could be said to combine elements of romance *and horror,* and *Tennen Shôjo Mann Next* of romance, horror, martial arts and comedy.

Though his films are often described and interpreted as intentional attempts at 'genre-bending: delivering conscious comment on genre is rarely the source of the combinations described above. If a director does not feel tied to genres and does not take genre as his starting point for making a film, then he is free to incorporate elements from any source to get his message across. That source can be a cinematic genre, but just as easily a personal memory, a real-life event or the director's own imagination. When a filmmaker is free from the conventions and rules of a genre and free to incorporate elements as he sees fit, then the result can often appear as a combination or a re-invention of genres, or the bending of genre rules. This is especially true if the film is presented to an audience as being a genre work, as a result of which that audience will adjust their expectations accordingly and take the genre as the starting point for interpreting the film.

Most of Takashi Miike's films are offered to him as packaged projects, often with a screenplay finished and main cast already decided. He works as a director-for-hire rather than being involved from the start with the development of the screenplay (in his entire career he has only been credited once for involvement with the writing, *on MPD-Psycho).* Many of the projects he is offered will inevitably be genre-based. The Japanese film industry offers its

directors a good deal of creative freedom -including the freedom to change the screenplay as they see fit-as a result of the low budgets they have to work with. A normal budget for a Japanese film today lies somewhere between US$ 500,000 and 1 million, with many V-cinema productions being made for considerably less. It is understandable however that producers want the final film to be commercially viable, which often means they must be able to promote it as being in a specific genre. Thus the film must contain a number of recognisable genre elements, at least enough to fill a two-minute trailer.

Miike's approach is not to take these requirements as the point of departure for his filmmaking. Examination of his work reveals quite the opposite: the genre elements are the result, not the premise. They are the surface, the final and most visible stage in a process that consists of a small number of interconnected themes. These themes run like motifs throughout his oeuvre, reappearing in film after film, giving Takashi Miike's work a remarkable thematic consistency at odds with the popular perception of him as a director who makes little more than audacious genre films.

Several essays have been written in the past about the thematic content of Miike's work, which have attempted to define those themes. In Japan, these include writers Tokitoshi Shiota. Kasho Abe and Takahisa Zeze. The latter argued[1] that the characters in the director's films are united by their inability to escape Japan, either physically or more importantly as a state of mind. Published in 1998, his essay was based largely on the films Shinjuku *Triad* *Society*, *Rainy* Dog and the then newly-released The *Bird* People in *China*, all of which feature Japanese characters in foreign countries. His theory was further refined and expanded by Aaron Gerow[2], who stated that what unites Miike's characters are not their ties to Japan but their lack of those ties. In his essay, Gerow put particular emphasis on what he called "the impossible dream", the imaginary utopia the characters have created in their minds and which they seek to reach in order to escape their rootless state. Although these writers all touched upon elements of the thematic structure of Takashi Miike's cinema, they overlooked how deeply interconnected the themes in the director's work are and how those themes work as a process.

This process consists of six stages through which the characters and their actions (and thus the story) develop, sometimes moving through each of those stages successively, at other times through only a few of those stages. However, the order in which they do so is always the same, and the basis - which defines characters at their most fundamental level - and the final stage are always present in his films. Below is a detailed examination of these themes in reverse order, starting with the base and ending at the surface.

1. THE ROOTLESS INDIVIDUAL

The most fundamental defining characteristic of the characters in the films of Takashi Miike is their existence in a medium state: they float between two elements, feeling rootless, part of neither one nor the other. The source of these missing roots comes in various guises, but always defines the characters' lack of identity.

- Firstly, those roots can **be cultural or ethnic.** As signalled by Aaron Gerow, characters don't feel a connection to one culture, ethnicity or nation. In Dead or *Alive* and *Shinjuku Triad Society* for example, the main characters are ***zanryu koji***: children born in Japan of ethnically Japanese parents who were themselves born overseas (mainly in China during or after World War 2) but have returned to Japan. Born into a family in which one, two and sometimes more generations of ethnic Japanese lived in a foreign culture, these children grew into adults with an undefined sense of nationality. Despite living in Japan they do not feel Japanese and despite the strong presence of a foreign culture in their upbringing they also don't feel part of that foreign culture, since they were born in Japan. Characters of mixed ethnic backgrounds are in a similar situation: in Blues Harp, one of the two main characters is the son of a black American **G.I.** and a Japanese woman from Okinawa. Mario, the protagonist of *The City of* Lost Souls, is half Japanese and **half** Brazilian.

- Secondly, those missing roots can be **geographical.** Closely related to the above but running less deeply, this concerns characters who do have a clear sense of cultural or ethnic identity but who find themselves in a foreign culture, trying to cope with the differences between this foreign culture and their own. In *The City of* Lost Souls, Miike portrays urban Japan as a melting pot of foreigners, with Brazilians, Chinese and Russians living **side-by-side** with native Japanese. *Rainy Dog, The Bird* People *in China* and *The Guys from Paradise* all center on a Japanese character in a foreign country (all three in Asian countries, the significance of which is further detailed in the separate entries for these films in chapter 4:The Outlaw Director). In an interesting aside, Miike tends to show that Japanese have a lot more trouble adapting to life in foreign countries than foreigners do to life in Japan.

- Thirdly, characters can lack **genealogical** roots. Orphans can be found among the lead characters of *Dead or Alive 2, Audition* and *Rainy Dog.* In *Fudoh: The New Generation,* a father sacrifices his **oldest son** as an apology to his underworld superiors. The youngest son, who witnessed the murder as a child, grows into a vengeful adolescent who engages in a life-or-death struggle with his own father. Additionally, the term ***zanryu*** kojiis most commonly translated as 'war orphan'.

- Fourthly, the missing roots can be **physiological.** Related to the theme of **transformation** apparent in the work of other Japanese directors such as **Shinya** Tsukamoto[3], **Miike's** films however do not concern themselves with the process of transformation **or mutation,** but with being trapped between two states of being as a form of rootlessness. *Tennen Shôjo Mann* Next features a very classic transformation motif in the shape of vampires, albeit with

theconnotationthattheirvictimsareschoolgirlsfrom contemporary Yokohama. In *Fudoh: The New Generation* one of the characters is a hermaphrodite, who goes through life as a woman but is equippedwithboth male and female sex organs. She engages in sex with both genders, taking the female role when she's with a man and the male role when with a woman. Another character in the same film survives an explosion only by having half his body covered in metal prostheses.This idea of the cyborg asasecondlifefora humancharacterwasexpanded in *Full Metal Gokudô*, released one yearafter *Fudoh*. In *Full Metal Gokudô* a yakuza is assassinated alongside his boss'and revived by a mad scientist as a creature who is part man and part robot. To further complicate matters, the few human parts incorporated into his new body mainly came from his dead superior. Another well-developed example of science-induced rootlessness can be found in *Andromedia*. Here the memory of a girl who died in a traffic accident is uploaded into a virtual version of the girl's body living inside a computer.

Stuck between two physical states: *Fudoh: The New* Generation's Mika allows her masculine side to dominate for a rare moment.

- Finally, the missing roots can be **mental.** Psychosis, schizophrenia and the loss of personality feature heavily in ***MPD-Psycho,*** in which the main character is a detective whose extraordinary talent for profiling serial killers has gone over the edge into pure schizophrenia. Despite his condition he helps the police track down a murderer whose personality is transferred from person to person like a form of possession. The titular character in *Ichi the Killer* is a young man manipulated into committing murder through hypnotic suggestion.

It is this rootless state that forms the most basic shared characteristic between Miike's protagonists. What results from that state is what brings us to the second stage in the process, the theme of the outcast.

2. THE OUTCAST

While their rootless nature blurs the characters' own sense of personal identity, their medium state also has its repercussions on the way they are viewed, judged and treated by the world around them. Since they do not belong in the society in which they live, and they are different from others, their environment does not accept them as part of its community.

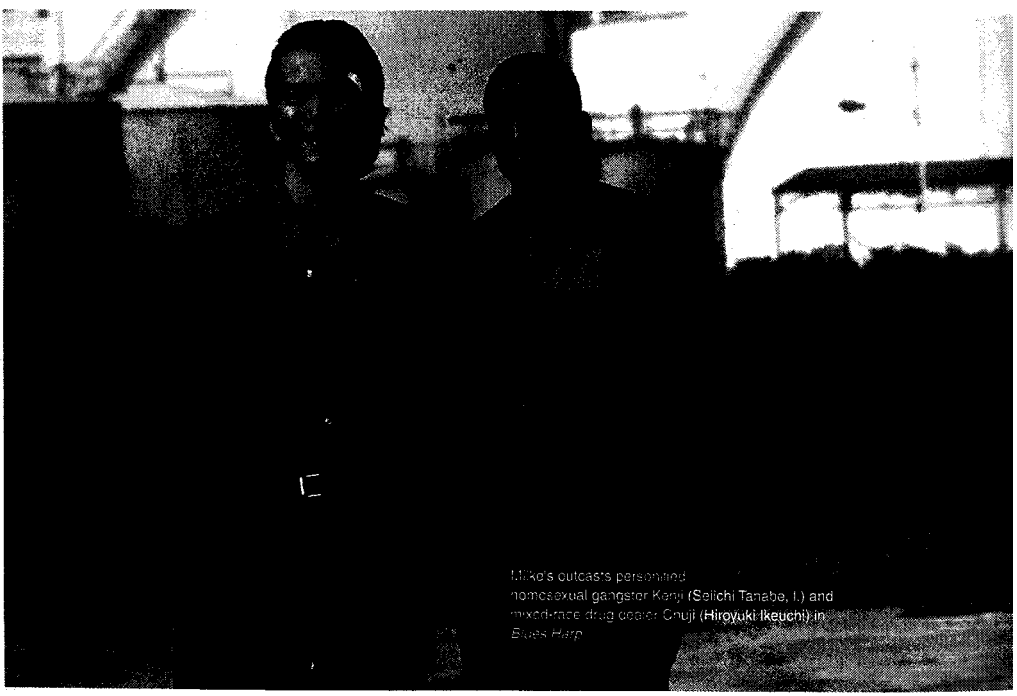
In addition to the various rootless characters described in point 1, these outcasts also include those who are sexually deviant. Miike's films run the gamut of deviation from the heterosexual norm. Homosexuals and gay sex feature in numerous films. Sadomasochism and bondage play varying degrees of importance in Lady Hunter, *Full Metal Gokudô*, *Silver* and *Family* In *Ichi the Killer,* all characters are divided into being either predominantly sadist or masochist. Suggestions or depictions of fetishism, sodomy, incest, necrophilia, paedophilia, bestiality, transsexualism and the aforementioned hermaphrodite also pop up on various occasions throughout his work.

Outcasts united: Kakihara and his gang of ostracised yakuza in *Ichi the Killer.*

In another light, characters can also be outcasts because they are young. In both ***Tennen Shôjo*** *Mann* series, *Ley Lines,* ***Jingi Naki Yabô*** and most of all *Fudoh,* the generation gap is more akin to a gaping chasm, and the young are spurned by their elders. A similar fate befalls those who are poor or have fallen victim to economic downturn, as in the case of the family in *The Happiness of the Katakuris.*

As a result, the outcasts feel no allegiance to society and therefore feel no need to comply with that society's rules. Their reaction to this can be either one of two options: they become criminals, outlaws or otherwise embrace their existence in the margins of society; or they try to search for a form of happiness which will compensate for their feeling of being outsiders. We will further explore this search in point 3.

Within the context of the outcast it is important to note the use of location in Miike's films. A good number of the films that deal specifically with this theme are set in Kabukichb, Tokyo's equivalent to Amsterdam's red light district or **New York's 42nd** Street (during its **mid-**1970s peak). An enclave of the much larger district of Shinjuku, **Kabukichô** is a chaotic caval-cade of strip clubs, hostess bars, porn shops and other forms of nighttime entertainment. The area has long been a magnet for people on the fringes of society, as reflected in films like *Shinjuku Triad Society, Dead of* ***Alive,*** *Ley Lines* and ***Ichi*** *the Killer* which are all largely set in **Kabukichô.**



Miike's outcasts personified: homosexual gangster Kenji (Selichi Tanabe, l.) and mixed-race drug dealer Onuji (Hiroyuki Ikeuchi) in *Blues Harp*

3. THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

The happiness these characters hope to find also comes in several forms:

- **Escape from the environment.** For many of Miike's characters the way to find happiness is by escaping the society that makes them outcasts. A good example of this is found in Ley *Lines* and *The City of Lost Souls,* in which the protagonists attempt to find a way to leave Japan for Brazil. Even though like here the destination is sometimes specifically stated, it is, as Aaron Gerow has noted, little more than a utopian dream, an imagined ideal where everyone is accepted, no matter which creed. But the impossibility of reaching this ideal is inherent in the dream, as witnessed by the fates of the characters in numerous films, including *Shinjuku Outlaw, Rainy Dog, Ley Lines, Dead or Alive* and *The City of Lost Souls.*

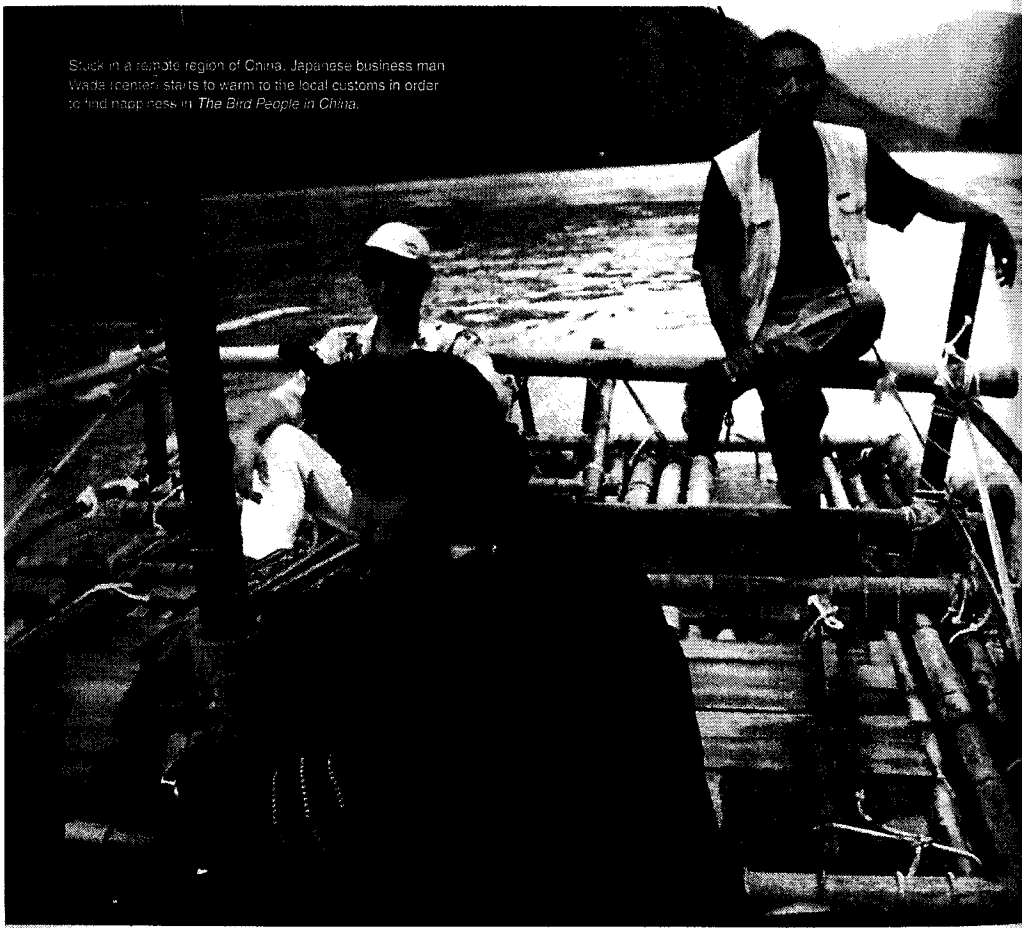
- **Harmony with the environment.** For Japanese characters in a foreign country, the only way to cope is to try and find harmony with the unfamiliar culture and adapt to it. Often this involves dispensing with the lure of money and economic certainty as a false source of happiness, closely linked with the fact that the countries they find themselves in are of a lower level of economic development than Japan. Interestingly, over the course of Miike's oeuvre, his Japanese characters have become better at this adaptation. Where Yuji, the Japanese hitman exiled Taipei in 1997's *Rainy* Dog, isolates himself from his surroundings, young businessman Wada learns to respect life in a rural Chinese village before returning home in 1998's *The Bird People In China.* Three years later, *The Guys from Paradise's* Kôhei not only adapts to life in The Philippines, he manages to be elected president by the time the film ends.

- **The ideal partner.** Both *Audition* and *Ichi* the Killer revolve around a character's search for the ideal partner or lover. In *Andromedia,* two adolescents are on their way to achieving a harmonious relationship when the girl dies. She returns to him as a virtual version of herself inside his laptop computer, with which the boy subsequently falls in love again. Like the utopian dream of those who seek to escape their environment, in all these cases the actual creation of the couple proves to be an impossible goal.

Aoyama's (Ryo Ishibashi) search for the perfect partner takes him to the strangest places. (From *Audition*)

• **Completeness of the family or the group.** In both The Happiness *of the Katakuris* and *Visitor Q*, the members of a dysfunctional family aim to find happiness by repairing the unit. Surrogate families and group units are a staple of Miike's cinema, offering refuge, security and belonging to characters who share the fate of being outcasts. This is in fact one of the main themes in the director's works and is further elaborated below in point 5.

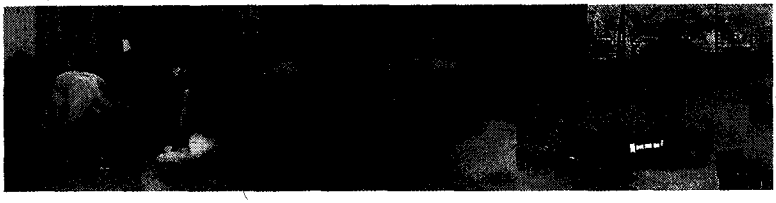
• **Nostalgia.** Like the family unit, nostalgia for childhood, beyond being a source of happiness for characters, is another main theme of Takashi Miike's work, as we will see in the next point.



Stuck in a remote region of China, Japanese business man Wada (center) starts to warm to the local customs in order to find happiness in *The Bird People in China*.

4. NOSTALGIA

The representation of childhood in the director's films is strongly nostalgic to the point of being idyllic. More often than not, however, the nostalgia is a state of mind rather than being presented as actual fact within the context of the story. The memory of an idyllic, happy childhood becomes a surrogate for the character's rootlessness and their less than happy present-day situation. This is most apparent in *Dead* or *Alive 2,* in which two hitmen on the run take refuge at the orphanage where they both grew up.



The child and the violence (from left to right):
The childhood version of *Audition*'s Asami contrasted with the acts of her adult self
One of Riki Fudoh's underage assassins at work in *Fudoh: The New Generation.*
In the finale of *Ichi the Killer,* young Takeshi turns his newfound ability for violence against the man who helped him discover it.

The idyll that this state of mind evokes does function within certain limits. Despite being treated with nostalgia, the view of childhood is rarely through rose-tinted glasses. In many cases, childhood is filled with fights and beatings from drunk fathers. The teenage characters in *Kenka No Hanarnichi,* both *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* films and both series of *Tennen Shôjo Mann* find their main source of joy in fighting each other, and they spend much of the story covered in bruises and bandages. This type of violence is rarely harmful or damaging. Despite the cuts and bruises, permanent damage is rarely done; the idyll of childhood entails the invulnerability of the child and in all of the above films violence itself becomes nostalgic. Particularly in Kenka No Hanamichiand the *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* films, the act of fighting functions as a means to celebrate or recapture youth.

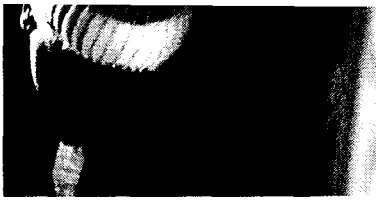
This idyllic childhood usually ends quite abruptly after high school. After graduation, characters have to face maturity and are confronted with the adult world. In *Dead or Alive 2, Fudoh, Visitor* Q and *Ley Lines* we see adolescents who leave their childhoods, and thus their roots, behind. This creates a rupture which Miike often intensifies by contrasting the innocence of childhood with the violence of adult life. This contrast works both ways; Miike not only uses this violence to underline the childhood idyll, but also uses the childhood idyll to intensify the impact of violence. After they leave their childhoods behind the m, characters also lose their invulnerability and are confronted with death. The director portrays the contrast in two ways:

• By letting the child come into direct contact with (adult) violence. A good example of this can be found in *Dead* or *Alive.* When the younger brother of a gangster-a student who has been unaware of his elder brothers illegal activities – picks up a gun for the first time in his life, this is immediately followed by the young man's death. In films including *The* City *of* Lost Souls, Rainy Dog and *Lady* Hunter, children are witnesses to the violence afflicted on their elders. In *Dead or Alive* 2 Miike employs a juxtaposition rather than a direct confrontation: he cuts back between a violent, bloody gang war and a classroom full of children watching a comical stage play.

• By substituting the adult with his or her childhood version. in Dead or Alive 2 – a quintessential film in this respect, because it revolves around the contrast between the innocent child and the violent adult – adult characters are replaced by their childhood versions during a gunfight. We see adults shoot children, even though they are in actual fact shooting other adults, which drastically increases the impact of the violence.

Here too, the choice of location reflects the theme. In a parallel to the director's own life, many of his films about childhood and the high school years are set in Osaka. What's interesting to note is that the Osaka children in Miike's films are the rare exceptions to the rule of rootlessness: they are native people growing up on their native soil. To the director, Osaka constitutes reality. it's the world he knows well and which he feels comfortable in portraying with a certain degree of realism. in this respect, the city forms the antithesis to Kabukichô, which in Miike's films represents the myth versus Osaka's reality.

Nostalgia as a state of mind: the spirit of Mai (Hiroko Shimabukuro) joins the memory of childhood in *Andromedia.*



5. THE FAMILY UNIT

As noted in point 3. Miike's outcast characters have a strong tendency to form groups.These serve as surrogate families characterised by a sense of belonging. They also serve as a surrogate for missing roots, since these groups are made up of characters from common backgrounds and common fates. The gangs of *zanryu koji* in Dead or *Alive* and *Ley Lines* are quintessential examples, as of course are the many yakuza groups that populate Miike's films (this sense of belonging to a yakuza group is felt particularly strongly in *Agitator* and *Ichi the Killer*). Even in very early films like *Eyecatch Junction* and *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai,* outsiders and outcasts form groups in order to confront the outside world with more strength and determination.

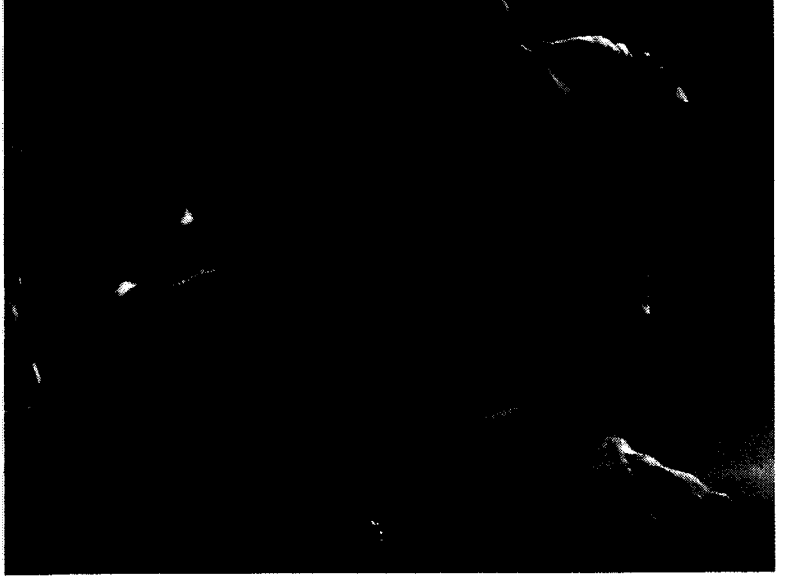
But the unit must make an effort to stay together. If the ties start to show strain, the end is nearly always inevitable. Even the loss of one member usually means the start of the group's disintegration, which inevitably ends in death for its members. This goes for outside influences that threaten the group, such as in *The City of Lost Souls, The Guys from Paradise* and *Agitator,* who find themselves the target of attacks by rivals and hitmen. It also holds true for the dynamics within the group. Betrayal is never tolerated and is punished by death or expulsion. But this in turn also means disintegration: despite the fact that the element which threatens the unity is punished, this punishment in itself initiates the group's downfall. When one of the members of the gang in *Dead or Alive* runs off with the loot from a robbery, he is shot by the leader of his own group. The rest of the film depicts the gang slowly falling apart, losing one member after another. In *Ichi fhe Killer* a number of ostracized gangsters form their own yakuza group, but its weakness is revealed from the start when one of them expresses the wish to not be involved. The threat of physical violence keeps him in line, but the group's fate is sealed in that moment. When the credits roll, none of them are left alive.

This also holds true in cases where the group unit is an actual family of blood relatives, particularly when that family is involved in organized crime, like in *Fudoh, Jingi Naki Yabô 2* and *Family.* However, we also see that in the case of families the process is reversed: that the starting point is a state of disintegration and that members work towards restoring the unit. Clear examples of this are *Visitor Q* and *The Happiness of the Katakuris,* whose families end the film a tot happier and a lot closer than they were at the start.

Above:
The family unit faces its biggest threat in *Visitor Q*: itself

6. VIOLENCE

There is one thing that binds the themes described above and that's that they all result in violence. The characters' outcast positions, the end of childhood and the disintegration of the group all result in what forms the surface of Takashi Miike's films: the depiction of crime, violence, sex, vice, rape, narcotics and death. This is the world that the characters either find themselves in or create for themselves. In this context, the portrayal of sex as being on the whole unpleasant, forced andviolent is an understandableone.Thesourceforsex in Miike's films is rarely love. The characters involved live ugly, violent lives in ugly, violent worlds and their sexual encounters don't tend to be any different. They also don't tend to be very titillating or erotic. The sex scenes in Takashi Miike's films do not exist to arouse the audience, but to define the characters and the lives they lead[4].



And with that, we find ourselves back in genre cinema. Those genre elements that label his films and that help promote, sell and exhibit them are, as we have seen, the *result* of Takashi Miike's filmmaking rather than its point of departure. In that sense, it was perhaps inevitable that the director found a home in genre cinema. This coexistence of genre with a deeply personal form of storytelling is an example of how remarkable the work of this director is. It is quite striking how closely the themes he deals with are related to his own life and experiences. His family's history in China and Korea, his childhood in Osaka, his departure for Yokohama after high school; personal experiences such as these are often directly reflected in the films, as we will see in more detail in the following chapters.

Violent lives (above and opposite):

Deadly Outlaw Kunisada goes on a rampage. Kakihara admires *Ichi* the *Killer*'s handiwork.

3. The Video Years (films 1991 - 1995)

Perhaps it was his lack of drive to become a filmmaker, but Takashi Miike's early work is a lot less accomplished than his later films. The films he made between his debut in 1991 and 1995's *Shinjuku Triad* Society are for the most part hardly the work of a prodigious talent.

It is no coincidence that these were nearly all films made for the V-cinema market. With two exceptions they were released directly onto video. To all intents and purposes,'they are the most basic form of genre films, made for a market and by that markets requirements. Many of these films witness little ambition beyond delivering the action, comedy, sex, violence, romance or intrigue the viewers (or more precisely the producers) demand, sometimes with a shaky storyline or questionable performances from the cast. Takashi Miike certainly had to grow into his art. Although a number of his early films contain traces of the themes and concerns that characterise his later work, and show a gradual development in his style and in the handling of his craft, the director didn't find his voice as an artist until the aforementioned *Shinjuku Triad Society*.

For all its emphasis on delivering exploitable genre elements, V-cinema also allows its filmmakers a good deal of creative freedom and it's perhaps as a direct result of this that Miike was able to explore in a crude but increasingly deliberate way the themes and the style that now characterise his work. Takashi Miike is only one of the filmmakers who in recent years have come to play a defining role in Japanese cinema and whose background is in V-cinema. A large part of the filmographies of Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Masato Harada, Rokurô Mochizuki and Shinji Aoyama consists of straight-to-video gangster films, including five- or six-part series made over the course of a mere two years'. All these men have gone on to make films with very personal styles and concerns, films which in many cases still containclearconnectionstogenre;V-cinema hasdefinitelyprovenitsvalueasatraininggrounds for Japanese filmmakers.

The 'video years' can therefore be considered formative years for Takashi Miike as a filmmaker, but they are crucial precisely because they are formative. The films he made in those years contain the seeds of his later work, so even though we can divide his work into two distinct periods, those periods are inextricably linked. One could not exist without the other and knowledge of his early work is crucial for understanding his later films.

As we saw in chapter 1, the rise of V-cinema as an industry was what allowed Takashi Miike to become a film director. With the demands of a new and growing market, and a steady stream of financing from both inside and outside the traditional film industry, opportunities for new directors were plentiful. In 1991, after working as an assistant director for four years, Miike was asked to direct the comedy *Eyecatch* Junction for Vision Produce, one of the many new companies funded by private investors that had sprung up to produce films for the video market.Two months before shooting on his debut film was scheduled to start, another project landed in his lap. The same company was also co-producing the action film *Lady Hunter* (Lady *Hunter* – *Koroshi* No Prelude), for which Toshihiko Yahagi was unable to do his directorial duties. With Yahagi's script in hand (written under the pseudonym of Tatsuo Eguchi) Vision Produce went to Miike, who shot the film before production on *Eyecatch* Junction was to commence.

As a straight-to-video action movie, ***Lady Hunter*** does its job. Its perfunctory faux-political intrigue is little more than an excuse to stage two lengthy action scenes, which are executed with a fair degree of reliability without ever becoming exceptional. Indeed, the wholepremise wasalreadyoverlyfamiliarbythe timethefilm was made: a former soldier forced back into action to protect his loved ones against a group of ruthless conspirators is the stuff of a hundred mid-1990s Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone or Chuck Norris vehicles. *Lady Hunter* is unashamedly modelled upon American action films of the period, with one difference: the protagonist is female.

This protagonist's name is Saeko, a former member of a special operations unit in the US Army. At 24 she has an implausibly extensive track record: she served several years in the Japanese army before transferring to the American armed forces and carrying out missions in Grenada and Nicaragua, earning herself a very early retirement. Saeko (played by former pop idol Yoshie Kashiwabara, who makes an unlikely soldier as well as an improbable 24-year old) now lives in a ramshackle apartment and suffers from nightmares about her wartime experiences - the actual extent of which never becomes clear, since the black-and-white flashbacks show her doing little else but run through a field with a machine gun in hand. Her former superior officer Ikehiro is also retired from active duty and now runs a day care center for rich children.

Stills of *Lady Hunter* © 1991 Vision Produce / Tenku Shobo

Left: The lady hunter puts her commando skills to use.
Center: Saeko and ex-lover Ikehiro under siege.
Right: Saeko turns the tables by ambushing the kidnappers in *Lady Hunter*'s *finale.*

One of the children Ikehiro takes care of is Riki, whose mother one night fails to pick him up. Waiting until late in the evening for a sign from the boy's mother, Ikehiro finally decides to take Riki home with him. On the way to Ikehiro's house, their car is hijacked by a small band of criminals led by an enigmatic man in sunglasses. They attempt to kidnap Riki, but Ikehiro and the boy manage to escape. They take refuge in Saeko's house, which is soon the subject of a violent siege by the would-be kidnappers. Barely surviving the lengthy assault thanks to their wartime guerrilla skills, they decide to investigate into the identity of Riki's parents, discovering that the little boy is the son of the king of Moldav (sic) and that the mysterious man in sunglasses is the mastermind behind a plot to overthrow the king. When Saeko visits Riki's mother in hospital (she was in a car accident the night before), the kidnappers move in to snatch Riki. Taking the boy, they leave Ikehiro seriously wounded. He manages to stay alive just long enough to tell Saeko what happened, leaving the heroine to set matters straight in a big action finale.

Though a generic action piece, the gender switch at the center of *Lady Hunter's* narrative invites a feminist reading. With the woman picking up arms and the man staying home to care for the infant child, it would certainly seem as if a conscious attempt was made to subvert the action genre's division of male and female roles. However, as a character, there is little to distinguish Saeko from the mould of the action hero as normally applied to male characters. She can fight and pull a trigger as well as any musclebound Austrian, but there is nothing about her that is expressly female. Aside from the few moments of romantic tension between her and Ikehiro, Saeko's presence is completely asexual, suggesting the possibility that the part had been written with either the intention or the option of a man taking the lead role. In the scene in which Saeko goes to the hospital to speak to Riki's mother, she steals a nurse's uniform and leaves its original owner writhing on a bed, wearing only a tiny slip, tied up with rope in a very elaborate bondage pattern, moaning in. a mixture of desperation and sexual excitement. An oddly sexually-tinted method indeed for a female action hero to dispose of another woman. As scenes such as these illustrate, the character of Saeko is an action hero figure first and a woman only a distant second. Likewise there is also little to make the character of Ikehiro expressly male. The casting makes the difference, not the characters. What may seem like feminist intent is really little more than a gimmick.

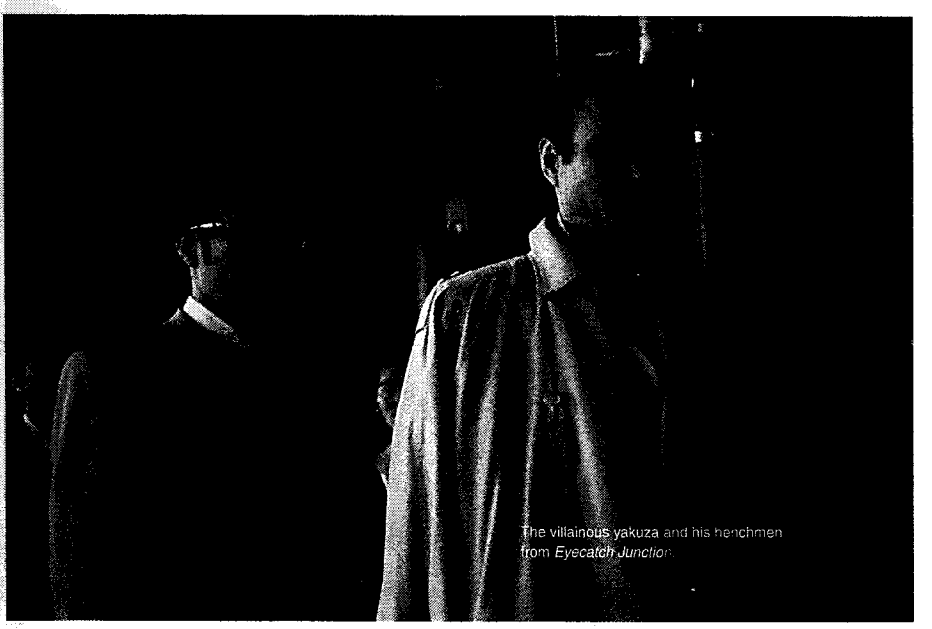
Seen in the context of Takashi Miike's work, this first film contains three interesting aspects which form very rough templates for what would later become characteristics. Firstly, there is the character of Riki. He is the first example of the child confronted with violence that populates Miike's later work. In fact, the character of Riki is very similar to Carla, the little girl kidnapped by a renegade yakuza in The *City of Lost* Souls. What's lacking in *Lady Hunter* howeveristheemphasison thecontrastbetween thepurityofthechildandthedestructiveness of violence, which Miike would explore in *Rainy* Dog, Dead or *Alive* 2 and *Ichi the Killer* among others. For a formulaic action film like this one, violence is the raison d'être: it is a given and its presence is never doubted.

Secondly, the appearance of a non-Japanese character speaking his own language is another example of what would become a staple of Miike's cinema in later years. Here, Saeko's US Army past is represented by a black American named Eddie (M. Coleman) who serves as her informant and aid, delivering information and weaponry just before she goes into battle against the kidnappers. Eddie is introduced speaking English, but is eventually

revealed as speaking quite fluent Japanese. His Japanese is at least far better than Saeko's English, which already hints at the way Miike portrays foreigners in Japan: that they have a lot fess trouble adapting to Japanese society than the Japanese do to any foreign influence. Again, *The City* of Lost Souls is a prime example with its many foreign nationalities all being bilingual, while the Japanese characters can barely muster a word of English. In Lady *Hunter* though, Saeko's poor command of English has more to do with Kashiwabara's shaky delivery than with any intention on the part of the director (bad delivery of English dialogue is a problem that would come back to haunt Miike's early films, more about this later).

Thirdly, *Lady Hunter's* title sequence consists of a very simple version of the high-speed montages that would open later films like *Blues Harp, Dead or Alive* and *The City of* Lost Souls. Compared to those films the montage in *Lady Hunter* is very brief, consisting of only four shots, but the principle is the same: a collage of highlights from the film meant to establish tone and atmosphere.

Although *Lady Hunter* was the first film Takashi Miike directed, it was not the first of his films to be released. This honour belongs to the aforementioned ***Eyecatch*** *Junction* (*Toppû! Minipato Tai* **-** ***Eyecatch*** *Junction),* which beat *Lady Hunter* to the video shelves by two months. ***Eyecatch*** *Junction* is again a film with female protagonists. That Takashi Miike made his debut with two films about women is rather uncharacteristic, since female characters are on the whole rather peripheral in his work. In fact, after ***Eyecatch*** *Junction,* he wouldn't direct another film with female protagonists until 1998's *Andromedia.*



The villainous yakuza and his henchmen from *Eyecatch Junction.*

Stills of *Eyecatch Junction* © 1991 Japan Home Video

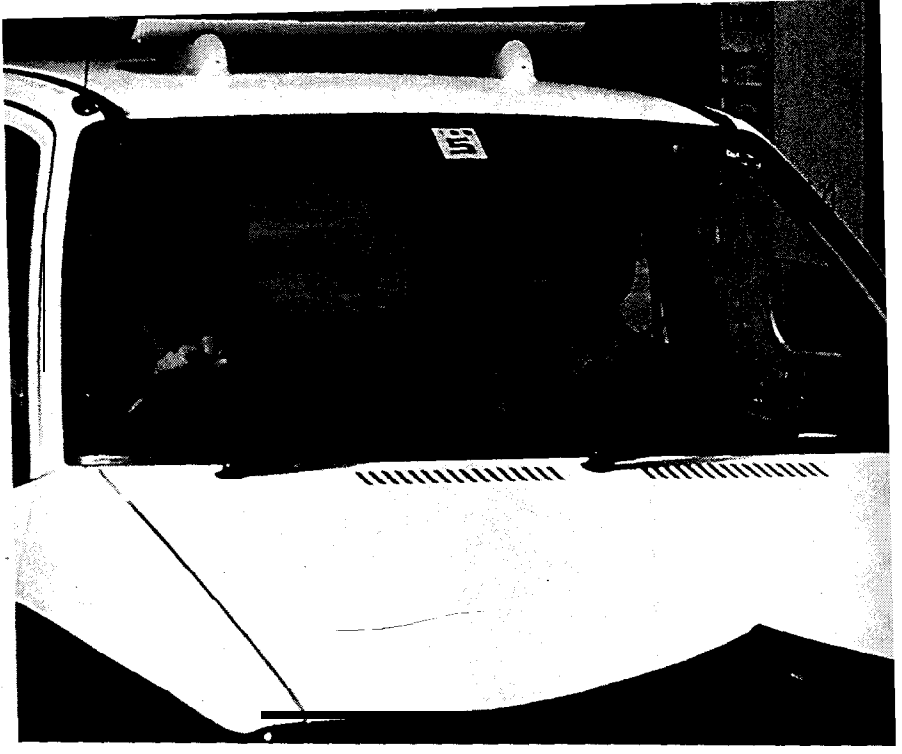
As in the case of Lady Hunter, a feminist interpretation of *Eyecatch Junction* also doesn't stand up to very close scrutiny. The protagonists are four female police officers who are fed up with their disadvantageous position in comparison to their male colleagues, particularly when they can out-fight and out-drink even the department's hotshot detective Kawamura (Daisuke Nagakura, a regular in Miike's early films). In order to convince their superiors that they are as worthy as any man, they embark on a training regimen with the ultimate goal of catching more criminals and getting recognised as the departments top cops.

However, from the film's opening scene it's immediately clear that the intentions here are hardly feminist. Two of the main characters, Atsuko and Yoko, are introduced while mistaking their colleague Kawamura for a criminal. As they knock him senseless, they accidentally set free the suspect he was about to apprehend, but whom the girls mistook for his victim. Throughout the film, the four women are equal parts tough, cute and stupid. Their training regimen consists of gymnastic exercises with hula hoops, serpentines and rubber balls, which they ultimately use to defeat the film's main villain – a perverse yakuza in rubber underwear who kills college girls after having sex with them. The girls call their secret pact 'Eyecatch Junction', named after the effect their exercises in skin-tight leotards have on their male colleagues.

Like Lady Hunter, this film contains several elements which the director would later develop further, the most important of which is the protagonists' secret pact. This is the first

Eyecatching indeed. Atsuko and Yuko are ready to face the enemy.

Opposite
The police chief faces his worst enemy.



Atsuko and Yuko in their minipato (miniature patrol car)

example of outcasts forming a group to confront their environment. The four protagonists are the only female police officers in their department and it's this outcast status that inspires them to band together and form a group. This makes them predecessors to the groups of outcasts in later essential Miike films such as *Ley Lines* and Dead or Alive, whose units function in essentially the same manner as that in *Eyecatch* Junction.

Additionally, the character of the villainous yakuza is something of a blueprint for later villains, in the sense of him being a sexual deviant with a penchant for sadism. *Lady Hunter* already contained a gun crazy sadist (who was also the main villain's gay lover), and in later films this character returns as both a villain (*Shinjuku Triad Society's* crime lord Wang) and a hero (*Ichi* the *Killer's* torture-loving yakuza enforcer Kakihara).

Like the title sequence of *Lady* Hunter, *Eyecatch Junction* also contains a montage, albeit over the end credits rather than in the film's opening minutes. It's a step closer to the later examples in *Blues Harp* and *Dead or Alive* in that it's edited to music. Sadly in this case the music is Tomio Terada's rather atrocious attempt at doing ersatz electric boogie, playing samples from the film's dialogue through what sounds like a cheap synthesizer. Image-wise the montage consists of highlights from the film intercut with a new scene of the main characters doing a dance routine in the police gymnasium.

After his two-tiered V-cinema debut, Takashi Miike returned to television for his next project, the TV film *Last* Run (Last *Run* = *Ai To Uragari* No *Hyaku-Oku Yen,* 1992). The film started life through a screenplay competition organised by broadcaster TV Tokyo and the financial newspaper Nikkei, for which readers were asked to submit a feature-length script about a business-related topic. The winning screenplay would be realised as a television film broadcast by TV Tokyo.

Keiwa Okada's script, which was finally awarded the top prize, was inspired by a real-life event that was a perfect symbol for Japan's bubble economy affluence: a Japanese collector paid US$ 18.8 million for a 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO, the largest sum of money ever paid for a single car. Based on this premise, Okada wrote a story of a former Formula 2 racing champion who is asked to assist in setting up an auction of vintage cars. The auction's trade company sponsor has its sights set on the private collection of Italian ex-racer Gianpiero and they hire former Japanese racing champ Morita (Koichi Iwaki) to be their intermediary. Morita, nicknamed Kamikaze Run, was Gianpiero's main rival on the circuit until a crash put him in hospital and Gianpiero in a wheelchair.

The auction is like a trip down memory lane for the Japanese driver: Onodera, the trade company representative who hired him, is an old friend, while the woman he is partnered with turns out to be none other than his ex-lover Kyôko. Unbeknownst to Morita, both Onodera and Kyôko are in cahoots with billionaire Kurosawa (Shingo Yamashiro, making his first of many appearances in Miike's films), who intends to rig the auction in order to buy Gianpiero's collection for a minimal sum. When Kurosawa asks Morita to help him in his scheme, the driver refuses. Meanwhile, Onodera is blinded not only by the dollar signs in his eyes but by jealousy over his wife and son's affection for Morita.

Hatching a plan to stop Kurosawa from carrying out his scheme, Morita goes back to Italy to look up a retired Ferrari mechanic called Antonio. Together they build a replica of the rare Ferrari 250 GTO, which Morita enters into the auction as an authentic model. Upon hearing of the car's inclusion Kurosawa loses all interest in the Gianpiero collection and sets his sights on the GTO instead. After Kurosawa's opening bid, Morita steps in and drives up the price by bidding against him. In the end, Kurosawa acquires the car for US$ 45 million (rather than the 100 million mentioned in the film's Japanese title).Taking Kurosawa for a test drive in his newly acquired machine, Morita tells the billionaire that the car is a fake. Returning to the site of the auction, Kurosawa has no chance but to grin and bear it: his record bid has attracted major press interest and to back down now would mean a loss of face.

Last *Run* gave Takashi Miike his first opportunity to shoot a film abroad. Nearly all scenes that are set in Italy were shot on location, including Ferrari's hometown of Modena and the Imola circuit, employing local actors (though again the delivery of English dialogue by Iwaki and the Italian actors is quite bad) and a largely Italian crew. This set a pattern for his later work, although his productions on foreign soil since then have mainly been within Asia - most notably in Taiwan, China and The Philippines-with the exception of *The City of* Lost Souls, which was partially shot in the United States.

Shot on video, as is the custom for television productions, Last *Run* is rather unremarkable from a stylistic point of view. In his early years as a director Miike had a preference for using long, slow dolly shots, and this film is no exception. Most of these shots have no real purpose in supporting the characters or the story and are merely attempts to add

some dynamics to otherwise static situations – he uses them mainly in dialogue scenes to little added value. The film as a whole is rather formally composed, never straying from the beaten path of the docudrama, even in the film's numerous driving scenes which are shot to emphasise the fact that it is indeed Iwaki behind the wheel of each Ferrari (as befits the actor's macho image, he gets to drive three).

This conventional approach on a stylistic level mirrors the approach on the level of the writing. *Last Run*'s characters, whether leading or supporting, are never more than stereotypes.The righteous loner hero, the jealous husband, the devoted housewife, the greedy businessman, the ex-lover with a dark past: none of the characters offer much in the way of dimension or verisimilitude and neither are the developments they go through very surprising. There are also too many characters, and an entire subplot of Onodera's sister falling in love with a handsome young race driver serves no purpose other than adding an extra element of romance to the film (which it already has in the form of Morita and Kyôko, making the young love subplot completely redundant from a dramatic point of view).

What makes Last Run interesting is its critical attitude towards the excesses of the bubble economy. After the auction scene in which Kurosawa spends a fortune on the fake Ferrari, the film segues into an epilogue mixing real and fictional newspaper headlines and TV news footage about a series of business scandals. As the world economy drops in the wake of the Gulf War, the bubble era spendthrift is causing problems for Japanese businesses, not in the least Kurosawa's own company. Onodera misses out on the fortune he was promised and vents his frustrations on his family. When he hands in his resignation, none of his superiors seem to care, leaving him to question what he values most in life – the answer inevitably being his wife and child.

This emphasis on the corrupting effects of money and the need to resist its lure in order to achieve happiness, is a characteristic of a number of more recent Miike films, including *The* Guys *From* Paradise and *The* Happiness of the *Katakuris*. *Last Run*'s epilogue of post-bubble insecurity returns as the background against which the story of Graveyard of *Honouris* set. In Miike's films, characters are never allowed to simply walk off into the sunset with a bag of money in their hands, no matter how much we as viewers would like to see them escape from their troubles. In *Shinjuku Outlaw*, *Rainy* Dog and Ley *Lines*, the protagonists are on their way to freedom and fortune, but their violent pasts catch up with them before they can attain either. In *Dead* or *Alive*, a big heist on an armoured transport is the start of a gang of robbers' downfall.

It's rather odd then that Last Run ends with a song entitled Dreams Come True played over the end credits. A strange choice of title given all the shattered illusions and the gloomy tone of the film's epilogue.

Released the same year as *Last Run, A Human Murder Weapon* (*Ningen Kyôki – Ai To Ikari No Ringu*) is an important entry in Takashi Miike's filmography. Not for its merits as a film but for marking his first collaboration with manga author and screenwriter Hisao Maki. Miike and Maki have teamed up on several occasions throughout the director's career, notably on the *Bodyguard Kiba* series, *Silver* and *Family*. A black belt karateka, Maki's manga stories usually revolve around characters with exceptional martial arts skills and are set in the worlds of professional wrestling, tournament karate, international espionage or some combination of the three.

Whatever his merits as a comic book writer may be, a good screenwriter Maki is not and *A Human* Murder Weapon is a case in point. Based on a manga written by Maki's brother Ikki Kajiwara, it's the story of a young martial artist called Karate Kid who dreams of becoming a professional wrestler, but who is trapped in the world of illegal underground fights. Having fled Tokyo after fathering a child with female karateka Kaoru, he ends up in Okinawa where he joins the illegal bouts organised by the silver-haired villain Jin (Daisuke Nagakura from *Eyecatch* Junction) and his unscrupulous American business partner. Effectively a prisoner in Jim's underground dungeon (located in the basement of an inconspicuous bar), he is forced at gunpoint by Jin's gay henchmen to compete against a series of hulking foreign martial artists. Just to antagonise him, Jin has Karate Kid's nightclub singer girlfriend Matilda kidnapped and pits the fragile vocalist against first a Western giantess and then a rather sturdy female wrestler. In both matches she ends up battered, stripped naked and humiliated, much to the delight of the largely Western audience.

Inneed of money to feed her child, Kaoru meanwhile consults her karate teacher Omoto (Hisao Maki in a tailor-made role) about ways of making a living out of her martial arts skills. Omoto sends her and the child to Okinawa to meet with Jin's American business partner. She too joins the violent spectacle, but finds out too late about the criminal practices of its organisers. When Jin realises that Kaoru and Karate Kid have a history, he forces her to compete alone against two oversized opponents: one male, one female. Karate Kid is taken out of his cell and made to watch as Kaoru struggles against the impossible odds. Then, remembering the words of encouragement he once received from his idol (real-life wrestler Atsushi Ônita playing himself), he beats up his two guards and rushes in to help Kaoru. Immediately, Jin sends every fighter he has at his disposal into the ring to get rid of the two rebellious lovers. Outnumbered and ready for the slaughter, Karate Kid and Kaoru are saved by the very sudden appearance of karate teacher Omoto. After pushing all the fighters out of the way, then taking the time to take off hisjacketand hissunglasses, Omotogoes intoaction.Joined by Karate Kid and Kaoru, this threesome overwhelms the dozen or so foreign giants sent in to kill them. When the fighters are beaten, Omoto walks off and the film ends.

There is little danger of anyone taking *A Human Murder Weapon* very seriously. The film makes no excuses for its willingness to deliver nothing but pure, exploitation. Shot on video on a visibly low budget, it forgoes decent plot structure, motivated characters and any semblance of logic in its eagerness to please. Instead it offers numerous martial arts bouts, cackling villains, a sprinkling of sex and a for Miike uncharacteristic undercurrent of xenophobia. Characters appear out of nowhere only to disappear again after they've served their purpose in yet another fight scene, while the story's main villain lacks any kind of agenda and never moves from his ringside table.

The blame certainly doesn't rest squarely on Maki's shoulders. Miike directs with little imagination, again making needlessly extensive use of dollies. The fight scenes are listlessly choreographed, coming off particularly poorly when compared to the footageof Atsushi Ônita's real-life wrestling matches that has been edited into the film. These clips which serve to remind Karate Kid of his ambitions, are more exciting and compelling than all the fights scenes in the rest of the film combined, not in the least because they feature actual crowds rather than the half dozen extras that sit in the darkness around the underground ring. Additionally, even at a shockingly brief running time of 70 minutes, *A Human Murder Weapon* still contains several shots whose sole purpose is to pad out the slight plot, most apparently

the recycling of individual shots in the fight scenes and in Kaoru's long but utterly pointless walk across a busy market square.

Only one brief moment in the film witnesses some inspiration on the side of the director: the juxtaposition of Kaoru's hopeless defeat at the hands of two opponents and a shot of her infant child, crying alone in its mother's dark prison cell. Elaborating on the element of the child witnessing violence as present in Lady *Hunter*, this short sequence goes a step further and creates a contrast which aims to intensify the impact of the violence. The effect is largely lost in the quagmire of *A Human Murder Weapon*'s sensationalism, but the sequence is nevertheless a significant step forward in the development of Miike's themes.

Despite the dire results of *A Human Murder Weapon*, Miike's next project again saw him teaming up with Hisao Maki and Ikki Kajiwara. Like the previous film, Bodyguard *Kiba* (1993) was based on a Kajiwara manga series, one which had previously been adapted for the big screen in the mid-1970s, in a pair of films by director Ryuichi Takamori with Sonny Chiba playing the title role[2].

Surprisingly, Bodyguard *Kiba* constitutes a major improvement over not only A Human *Murder Weapon* but all the films Miike had made up until that point. This advance was in no small amount thanks to the involvement of director of photography Naosuke Imaizumi. An acquaintance of Miike's from his days as a freelancer in television, Imaizumi's widescreen camerawork provided an added touch of class to *Bodyguard Kiba*, infusing the images with striking colours and a strong use of black and shadow.

For Miike as a director the film also represents a leap forward. Though still resorting to his dolly shots on occasion, more often than not he shot dialogue scenes with a fixed camera, incorporating moments of silence to give the dialogue exchanges a more natural flow and rhythm. When he did use camera techniques, he used them in a way that was motivated and that related to the characters or the mood of a scene. It's very likely that Imaizumi's presence had a positive effect on the way Miike employed the camera and chose his angles, since much of his progression as a director on *Bodyguard Kiba* is related to this aspect.

Script-wise too the film was an improvement over its predecessor. Although Hisao Maki was involved in the screenplay, he is credited as co-writer with Tetsuya Sasaki. It's hard to say exactly what the extent was of each man's involvement, but the fact remains that many of the problems that plagued *A Human Murder Weapon* on a script level are either much less apparent or completely absent in *Bodyguard Kiba*.

Maki's influence certainly is felt in the end result, however. Much of the film again consists of martial arts scenes, which have a lot more function this time since the protagonist Naoto Kiba (played by former middle-weight boxing champion Takeshi Yamato) is a man who relies on his fight skills rather than on guns and weaponry. The writer also returned for another supporting turn as a karate instructor (this would become a staple of all the Miike-Maki collaborations), this time as Tetsugen Daitô, the rich owner of a string of martial arts schools.

Daitô is the one who hires Kiba to protect Junpei, a former *chinpira* (low-level yakuza) andfailed boxerwhoisabouttobereleasedfromative-yearprison sentence. For Junpei (Daisuke Nagakura), his time in jail has given him refuge from his old yakuza colleagues in Okinawa, who are still after him for stealing and hiding a bag of money. Upon his release, it's these yakuza who are waiting for Junpei outside the prison walls. He is taken to an empty warehouse where the three gangsters try to beat a confession out of him, until Kiba interferes.

The two men take the boat to Okinawa to recover the hidden money, with various gangsters in hot pursuit. Junpei's former boss Gaisho (Ren Ôsugi in his first of many appearances in Miike's films) has fallen on hard times and has been forced to leave his spacious office for a decrepit apartment, with only the group's name sign reminding him of former glories. His fortunes taken away, Gaisho is more determined than ever to get his hands on Junpei and the money.

Back on the island Kiba finds reinforcement in the shape of Maki, master Daitô's female assistant, while Junpei runs into his girlfriend Yôko whom he hasn't seen since his arrest five years earlier. The two make love in Junpei's hotel room, but unbeknownst to him Yôko is now a heroin addict and Gaisho's lover. She helps the yakuza leader capture Maki and, creating the illusion that she has been kidnapped too, gets Junpei to bring the money (which was hidden inside a punching bag in his old boxing gym) to Gaisho's office. With the help of the local cop who arrested Junpei, Kiba invades the yakuza hideout and frees Maki, who tells Junpei the truth about Yôko. In a final showdown on the roof, Yôko is torn between her love for Junpei and her allegiance to Gaisho, who orders her to shoot her boyfriend. Not wanting to stay with the gangster and unable to live with her betrayal of Junpei, she fires two bullets through her own chest, killing both herself and Gaisho who was standing right behind her.

Most representative of the difference between Bodyguard *Kiba* and *A Human Murder Weapon* is Daisuke Nagakura's performance as Junpei. Nagakura, who was stuck with a resolutely flat villain role in the previous film, not only manages to make Junpei a human being but his performance also carries the film. As Kiba ('fang'), ex-boxer Yamato may have the moves and the physical presence required for the role, but his acting skills are insufficient to carry the film. As a result the emphasis of the story was quite wisely switched to the character of Junpei, effectively making Kiba a supporting character in his own film.

The character of Junpei is furthermore interesting because he is the first of Miike's rootless individuals. After a five-year prison sentence, he comes back to find that the world he knew has disappeared. His girlfriend is a junkie and his former friends are now his worst enemies. He is a man with a past but no present, while his future exists only in his dreams of once again becoming a boxer. By taking the time to portray his characters, Miike has also created a more developed and more human character than ever before.

The benefits are also felt in other areas. The Okinawan locale ii captured nicely, with a montage of the islands US military presence, rundown bars and seaside ports, while its decrepit buildings and narrow alleys are put to fairly good use in the film's action scenes. In several scenes the dialogue is spoken in the Okinawan dialect, which also helps to add dimension to characters and setting.

Although *Bodyguard* *Kiba* is a step up from Miike's previous work, taken at face value or compared to the director's later films it comes off as little more than an average action film. The intrigue is too uninspired and by-the-numbers, while some of the characters still don't have much of a function. The Okinawan police detective serves mainly as an extra hand in action scenes, but his intended rivalry with Kiba is never properly developed, making an epilogue of the two men facing off in a one-on-one fight feel very much superfluous. Kiba himself is also a rather flat character; one whose skills and personality are set from the very first scene and who never develops during the course of his adventures.

Tomio Terada's music sadly has not kept pace with other developments and his score once again consists of listless synthesizer tunes. This is fine for silliness like *Eyecatch Junction,*

but in a film with slightly more ambition his music detracts from the drama rather than enhancing it. The most jarring element of Bodyguard *Kiba* however is the utterly superfluous vanity scene given to Hisao Maki, who halfway through the film gets several minutes to show off his karate skills by fighting and beating a dozen armed opponents. This completely indulgent sequence has no relation to the rest of the story and seems to be added only to stroke the co-writer's ego, something which later Miike-Maki collaborations would repeat.

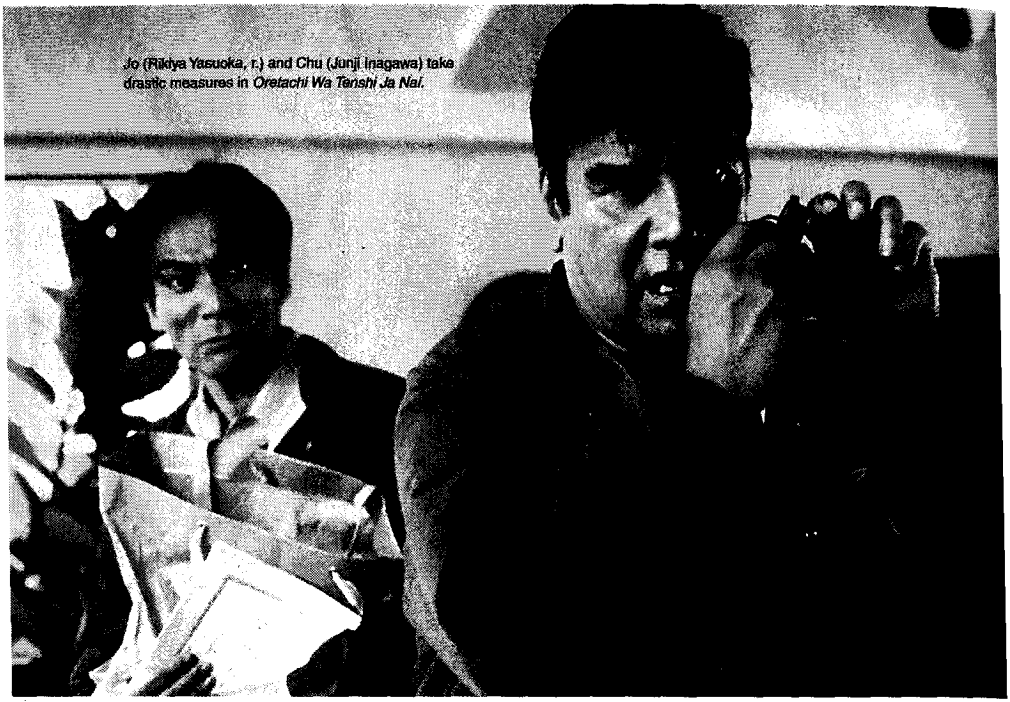
Although based on a novel, it's quite remarkable how similar the premise of Miike's next film ***Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai*** (1993) [lit: We are not angels] is to ***Bodyguard Kiba***: a former yakuza, just released from prison and trying to adjust to a normal life, finds himself in trouble with a group of gangsters. However, the execution couldn't be more different, since *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai* is first and foremost a comedy.

The former yakuza is Jo (Rikiya Yasuoka, who would also become a Miike regular), a bear of a man who is released from jail in the film's opening shot. Though still wearing the white gangster's suit he entered the jail with years ago, he is ready to leave the world of crime behind him and settle down into a normal life. Mere seconds after walking through the prison gates, a woman in a white dress passes him by. Not having seen a woman in quite a while, Jo's manliness immediately springs into action. This embarrassment is quickly remedied when Jo realises that this woman is his former crime associate Kenta, who has undergone a sex change operation while Jo was in prison. Kenta (played by the transsexual Love) is also on the straight and narrow these days and she offers Jo the chance to join Angels Gift Delivery, the small business she has set up with ex-burglar Chu (Junji Inagawa) and Eri (Makiko Kuno), a former biker girl who much to Kenta's dismay immediately takes Jo's fancy.

This quartet of former criminals trying to adjust to life as law-abiding citizens is another early version of the typical Miike group of outcasts. Throughout the film's plot, which pits them against a group of yakuza through a series of rather convoluted events, their unity is tested when Kenta, her love for Jo unanswered, decides to join a shady religious sect called the 'Love Cult'. The members of this cult have to donate large sums of money to their leader (Ren Ôsugi), in actuality a yakuza with a wig and fake beard preaching to his congregation via a closed circuit video system. It's through a combination of Chu's burglary skills and Jo's brute strength that they can invade the cults temple, save Kenta and take care of the scheming yakuza.

Intertwined with this is a second plot involving Eri's ex-boyfriend Sugeyoshi, who is now working for a yakuza called Yasuda. At the same time Jo and Kenta have a run-in with Yasuda and his men in the streets, Sugeyoshi asks Eri's help, claiming that his boss is trying to kill him. While hiding out at the Angels HQ, he steals a number of documents and makes off with them. Eri, still believing him to be on the run, goes to Yasuda's office to plea on his behalf. She offers herself to the gangster in exchange for the boy's life, but after Yasuda takes her to bed, he tells her that Sugeyoshi is in no danger and was in fact following his boss' orders. When Jo finds out what happened to Eri, he storms into Yasuda's office armed with a pocketful of hand grenades borrowed from an old yakuza friend (played by Jôji Abe, the author of the source novel).

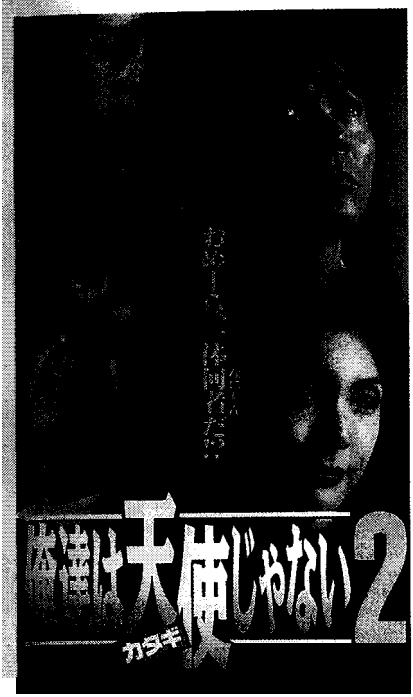
These two main plot strands which form the story of *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai* are tied together in a rather artificial way, by having Yasuda's operation involved with the Love Cults extortion practices. With each of these subplots already convoluted enough in their own rights, the combination of the two makes for very strained storytelling indeed.



Jo (Rikiya Yasuoka, r.) and Chu (Junji Inagawa) take drastic measures in *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai.*

Where the film works best is in the dynamics between the four main characters, although the character of Chu remains rather ill defined. Much of the humour in ***Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai*** is sexual, usually involving the size of Jo's member, Jo and Chu's curiosity about Kenta's body, or the triangle of unanswered love between Kenta, Jo and Eri. Though rather juvenile, the humour is on the whole fairly inoffensive, which mixes well with the likeable performances from the main cast, but less so with several dramatic scenes in the aftermath of Eri's sexual encounter with Yasuda.

The problems that plague the film are even more apparent in the sequel, which Miike shot back-to-back with the first film. ***Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai 2*** possibly suffers even more from a convoluted plot hinging on far too many coincidences. With the dynamics between Jo, Kenta and Eri established in part one, it's Chu who is at the heart of the narrative in the sequel. After using his burglar's skills to help out a woman who locked herself out of her car, the lady in question, Mio Kawahara, asks Chu and his friends at Angels Gift Delivery to help her clear out her father's house. This man was recently murdered under mysterious circumstances by a black-clad assassin (played by former rock'n roll singer and future Miike regular Mickey Curtis). As thanks for his assistance, Mio gives Chu a pair of shoes which her father had bought but



never had a chance to wear. The next day, Chu finds four photographic negatives hidden in the sole of one of the shoes, which contain the proof of financial wrongdoings at the mental hospital where mister Kawahara worked. When the four go to investigate the hospital, the mysterious assassin (who strangles people with a steel wire hidden in his wristwatch, just like Robert Shaw in *From Russia With Love*) comes after them in search of the negatives.

The plot of *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai* 2 is surprising only in its ability to rely on coincidence to advance the story. Like *A Human Murder Weapon,* the story is so underdeveloped that the film is only 70 minutes long. The four main characters have become thoroughlyflat, all-purpose crime fighters. Like the characters in a formulaic TV series, they are suitable for use in any intrigue that offers enough opportunity for a few gags and some punch-ups. The contrast between the dramatic moments and the comedy is even more apparent here than in the first episode, particularly in the scenes of the kidnapping and torture of Mio. Scenes like these sit rather uncomfortably with running gags like Jo repeatedly building and then crushing a model airplane.

This mishmash of comedy, action, violence and nudity is emblematic of the approach of many V-cinema productions. In advertising, trailers or video box art such aspects certainly help draw in the punters, but in the end little attempt is made to tie them up into a proper storyline. So even though the film should theoretically contain enough elements to entertain indiscriminate viewers, the lack of structure more often than not makes the end result rather a bore. Even at a mere 70 minutes.

That V-cinema also allows for a different approach to storytelling is demonstrated by ***Shinjuku Outlaw*** (1994). The most ambitious film Miike had yet attempted, this gangster piece is the first of the director's films to combine a number of his main themes and the first in which the connection between the themes forms the basis for the narrative. As a result, it precedes a whole host of later films, containing numerous elements which would become ma instays of the directors work.

The film starts off in Hiroshima, where a yakuza boss is dying of cancer. His son Kazuyoshi (Hakuryû), soon to be leader, asks his friend Yomi (Hiroyuki Watanabe) to carry

out a hit on the boss of the rival Muraoka group. Yomi agrees, thinking of the status this will bring him within the group. Before carrying out his assignment he calls up police inspector Tagami (Kiyoshi Nakajo) and tells him about the plans (getting arrested for murder and doing jail time is a way for a yakuza to increase his standing).

The next night, Yomi succeeds in killing Muraoka and several of his men (the hit takes place in a bowling alley in front of Muraoka's family and as Yomi's bullets hit the old man; blood splatters over his granddaughter's face – another good example of using a child to contrast and intensify the violence). But he is severely wounded in the ensuing gun battle and loses consciousness. He briefly wakes up again on the operating table of a hospital (which means that the phone call to Tagami saved his life) before dropping into a coma.

Ten years later, Tagami is stationed in Tokyo's central district of Shinjuku. He is a man well-informed of the goings-on in the area's criminal underworld, so well in fact that his acquaintances with the ruling yakuza group Okumura have taken on the form of corruption. But the Okumura are threatened by the newly arrived Taiwanese mafia, who have no qualms about starting a gang war over the yakuza territory. Then the call comes in that Yomi has awoken from his coma.

The first person to visit Yomi in the prison hospital is Kazuyoshi. Now the leader of the Hiroshima gang, he tells Yomi that it would be best to not come back, then offers him money to settle elsewhere, which Yomi refuses. As Kazuyoshi walks out the door, Tagami comes in. Upon hearing from Tagami that Kazuyoshi's former right-hand man Eto (Tatsuo Yamada) has fled to Shinjuku and is now in trouble with the Okumura group, Yomi decides to leave for Tokyo.

With all his possessions in a single paper bag, Yomi arrives in Shinjukuandquicklytraces Eto, now a small-time pimp of a group of Philippino prostitutes. After he rescues Eto from the hands of violent Okumura underling Katayama, the word about Yomi spreads around quickly. After they speak to Tagami. the Okumura ask him to join their ranks, a proposal which Yomi accepts.

He is partnered with Tsujii (Masahiro Sudô) – a Japanese born in Peru who calls himself a man with no nationality and eats noodles with a fork – and falls for a Philippino prostitute who knocks on his door one day with a bag of groceries courtesy, she says, of the Okumura group. (Played by Ruby Moreno, thischaracter strangely enough remains unnamed throughout the film, so we will refer to her here as Ruby.)

Yomi inevitably gets involved in the struggle against the Taiwanese, and we soon learn that the Okumura hired him with the intention of using him as a weapon against the newcomers. Meanwhile, Tagami's true role slowly comes to light when he tells Eto to steal the proceeds from a Taiwanese drug transaction taking place the following day and hand the goods to him. Eto complies and steals the suitcase of cocaine from the Taiwanese dealer, whom he beats up with a baseball bat. Instead of giving the drugs to Tagami, he goes to Yomi's house but only finds Ruby there. He hands her the case and leaves. Later that same night, the Taiwanese dealer breaks into the house and beats up Ruby to make her reveal the location of his suitcase. Yomi intervenes, then Ruby grabs his gun and kills the Taiwanese (that she fires the deadly shot is probably meant to serve as a justification for the needlessly protracted scene of her beating).

They flee the house and hide out in an empty office, supplied to them by Tsujii. While Yomi and Ruby decide to leave town as soon as possible, the Taiwanese find the dealers corpse

and start a full-scale gang war against the Okumura, which their young members take to with glee. (The outbreak of the gang war is a montage of violence, murder and mayhem set to music that prefigures the opening minutes of *Dead or Alive*, which is also set in Shinjuku.)

Meanwhile, Tagami has caught up with Eto, who was also about to flee, and the cop shoots him for not following his orders. When Yomi and the Okumura find Eto's body, they figure it was the Taiwanese who killed him. An enraged Yomi decides to avenge his friend and with the help of Tsujii he hits their restaurant, killing everyone Taiwanese in sight until they get to the leader, Fan. As Yomi's bullets pierce through Fan's body, blood squirts out of the wound and into a hot wok on the stove, sending the red fluid to an immediate boil. (The saying 'His blood is boiling' does not exist in Japanese, so this analogy is most likely unintentional, but such jokes would return in later films: *Kenka No Hanamichi*, *Fudoh*, *Dead or Alive*, *The City of Lost Souls* and *Ichi the Killer* all contain blackly comic gags set in kitchens or involving cookery.)

With Tsujii killed in the shooting, Yomi makes his way to Fan's office to steal his money before leaving town with Ruby. But upon arrival, he finds that several of the Okumura have beaten him to it and are dividing the Taiwanese money and drug supplies. Realizing he has been used, Yomi kills them, takes the money with him and leaves with Ruby in a car the same night.

Stopping near the coast the following day, Yomi confronts Ruby with his suspicions that she was sent to spy on him by Tagami. When she admits this, he asks her to take him to Tagami. Meeting the cop on a deserted beach, Yomi confronts him head on, but is killed by Tagami in the ensuing shoot-out. As the cop heads for Yomi's car and the money, Ruby fires a bullet into the gas tank, blowing up the car and the money with it.

In contrast to all the films Miike had made before, *Shinjuku Outlaw* is based on a tightly structured script, which handles its various characters and conflicting interests quite well. Also for the first time, *Shinjuku* Outlaw is a film with a recognisable and consistent thematic content. Yomi as a character is a continuation of *Bodyguard Kiba*'s Junpei and *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai*'s Jo: a man who has lost touch with his surroundings due to an extended prison sentence. Not only has he spent ten years in prison, he's spent them in a coma, leaving him completely detached from the world he wakes up in. Kazuyoshi's advice not to return to Hiroshima is little more than a banishment from his old milieu, leaving Yomi a solitary soul in an unknown world – in other words a completely rootless individual, like so many Miike characters that would come after him. His relationship with Philippino prostitute Ruby and friendship with Peruvian-Japanese gangster Tsujii are an attempt at forming a group and an environment to which they can all feel they belong. However, they never succeed at creating a real unit. Yomi and Ruby are together but they never become true lovers, due to the shadow of Tagami hanging over their partnership, while Tsujii moves in and out of Yomi's world and *can't* escape his ties with the Okumura group. It's interesting to note that despite this, they do follow the pattern of disintegration: in the confrontation with the Taiwanese, Tsujii is killed. Not long thereafter, Yomi goes down at the hands of Tagami, leaving Ruby as the only surviving member.

More successful at creating this unity is the Taiwanese mafia. They co nsist of not only Taiwanese and ethnic Chinese, but also Iranians and Indians: everyone w ho shares the fate Of being an outcast as a result of their ethnicity is welcomed into this cir cle, offered the home and the sense of belonging they can't find in Japanese society. This gan g represents social change – inevitable and nearly unstoppable in their attempts to muscle in on

what is traditionally yakuza territory (or Japanese territory, since we can easily read the criminal milieu as a metaphor for Japanese society and the gang's actions as the foreigner's effort to find a place therein). Even policeman Tagami is threatened by their presence, because the more ground they gain, the more he loses his grip on Shinjuku. And with his comfortable position within the area's criminal underground being his entire world -defining him as a Person, in fact - that would effectively mean the end of the life he likes so much to lead.

As the first film to fit the structural and thematic mould that would come to characterise Takashi Miike's cinema, *Shinjuku* Outlaw also contains many direct connections with the director's later work, with characters, scenes and situations which would return in numerous films. One very clear example is the character of Tagami, who forms the blueprint for the cop protagonists in *Shinjuku Triad* Society and *Dead or Alive.* He is a policeman whose immersion in the criminal underworld have made him as comfortable in that world as any of the criminals he is supposed to apprehend. His relationship with organised crime consists of favouritism, deal making and corruption, and the title *Shinjuku* Outlaw refers to him as much as it does to Yomi.

The Tagami blueprint also returns in *Ichi the Killer,* in the shape of Jijii (played in that film by Shinya Tsukamoto), but in this case it concerns a different aspect. Both characters are manipulators, whose behind-the-scenes schemes employ others to suit their own purpose and to achieve their own goals. The weak-willed form perfect prey: *Shinjuku Outlaw*'s Eto and Ruby return as Ichi and Karen in *Ichi the Killer.* Tagami's goals are to gain as much money and power as possible, and at the same time have the least amount of worries, hassle and work. Tough the yakuza may think they have the cop in their pocket and that it is they who are manipulating him, the opposite is true. Tagami has complete control over his affairs and every deal he makes ultimately suits his own purpose.

Another direct connection between *Shinjuku Outlaw* and later films is the presence of a group of non-Japanese muscling in on yakuza territory. *Shinjuku Triad* Society tells largely the same story, down to the nationality of the novice gangsters being Taiwanese (with the above mentioned crooked cop caught in the middle). In *Dead or Alive* it's a group of *zanryu koji* threatening the status quo in Shinjuku's crime world, again with a cop forced to react.

The character played by Ruby Moreno also returns in various guises in later Miike films: *Shinjuku Triad Society*, *Rainy Dog* and *Ley Lines* all contain female characters (usually prostitutes) who help the male protagonist escape their environment and the trouble they are in. They also serve as aid in the sexual sense, without the two characters ever developing love *(Ley Lines* could be seen as an exception in this case).

In addition to the similarities in plot, character and the aforementioned montage, there is another element which links *Shinjuku Outlaw* with *Dead or Alive*: the finale to both films is remarkably similar, albeit that the former keeps its feet firmly planted in everyday reality. (This is characteristic of *Shinjuku Outlaw* as a whole, since it is altogether more down-to-earth than Miike's later work and less exciting as a result), Both scenes feature a meeting of cop and criminal, a desolate setting (in *Shinjuku Outlaw a* beach, *in Dead or Alive a* grassy Plain), the presence of cars (one of which explodes) and a shoot-out that neither character Survives without spilling blood. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the director took the *finale* of *Dead* or *Alive* into such outlandish territory: he had already played the same scene straight in *Shinjuku Outlaw.*

As already noted in our examination of Last Run, in Miike's films characters can never walk off into the sunset with the money and their lives intact. *Shinjuku Outlaw* is a perfect example of this and the way the main characters' fates are sealed by the bag of money they carry with them is repeated in Rainy Dog, *Ley Lines* and The *City of Lost Souls.*

In each case, these ideas which first emerged in *Shinjuku Outlaw* are better constructed and better executed with each subsequent reappearance. But even though he would do it all again and better in later years, *Shinjuku Outlaw* should be considered the directors first fully realised film and the starting point of Takashi Miike as an artist.

As big as the step up from *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai 2* may have been, the step down to *Bodyguard Kfba 2 and 3 (Bodyguard Kiba – Shura No Mokushiroku and Bodyguard Kiba – Shura No Mokushiroku* 2, 1994 - 1995) is much more dramatic. After *Shinjuku Outlaw,* Miike shot the two sequels to his 1993 film back-to-back, and their lack of quality is a good example of how uneven the director's output was in the first years of his career.

Shot largely in Taiwan from screenplays by Hisao Maki, these sequels represent probably the lowest point in Miike's career from an artistic point of view. They are listlessly shot, sloppily edited (by Yasushi Shimamura, who would go on to become Miike's regular editor, greatly improving his skills along the way) and feature universally poor performances by actors whose voices are shoddily dubbed in a poorly delivered mishmash of languages. Structurally the two films sink to even lower depths than *A Human Murder Weapon,* with characters appearing and disappearing at whim, a ptot hinging on coincidences and a story that generally serves as an excuse to show uninspired martial arts scenes.

Takeshi Yamato returns in the title role, as does Maki as master Daitô. As was to be expected, the latter again gets ample opportunity to show off his martial prowess. With Maki serving as writer, actor and co-producer, it's very likely that he had a strong influence on the final result of both films. This would explain the numerous repetitions (throughout both films) of a sequence featuring him working out alone in his karate dôjô, bare-chested and his skin gleaming with oil. With absolutely no relation to the story, this sequence is no longer just a case of vain self-indulgence, it's simply masturbatory.

In *Bodyguard* Kiba 2, Naoto Kiba is once again hired by Daitô, this time to escort a young woman called Natsuki toTaipei.There they become involved in the tug-of-war between the local branch of Daitô's karate school and businessman Wang, an old friend of the Japanese karate master who is introduced as a kindly old geezer, but for reasons that remain unclear quickly turns into a criminal mastermind. Learning of Kiba's arrival, Wang sends a score of uniformed martial artists, ninjas and gangsters to the school to kill the newcomer. Many of the resulting fight scenes are badly timed, with wrongly chosen camera angles and a laughable use of undercranking, all of which results in making Takeshi Yamato look stiff and foolish. During one assault, Kiba is shot in the leg and staring into the barrel of a gun, when out of nowhere a fellow bodyguard called Ryo (Takanori Kikuchi) appears, with Daitô's assistant Maki in tow, to save him in the nick of time -the nick of time in this case lasts nearly half a minute, since the gunman prefers *to* needlessly stall and talk instead of plugging Kiba in the head, thus of course allowing for Ryo to intervene.

In the aftermath of the attack, the owner of the school (Jack Kao) is revealed to be Daitô's long-lost son Hideyuki and miss Natsuki as Hideyuki's sister. After a karate match between Hideyuki and Ryo, whose sole function is to convince us of the second bodyguards

fight skills, Ryo rounds up a number of Hideyuki's students and faces off against Wang's henchmen. After they've beaten them, which takes all of ten seconds, the credits roll and the film ends with a running time of 65 minutes.

There is little logic behind having your protagonist shot, then replacing him with a new character whose function is essentially the same. The introduction of Ryo is symptomatic of Hisao Maki's approach to screenwriting. Coming from a manga background, where long-running series are the norm, he is used to introducing new characters into a story as a method to keep the narrative fresh. But a film script requires an entirely different approach, demanding a more delineated and focused structure, which Maki was clearly unable to provide.

Ryo actually takes over as protagonist in ***Bodyguard Kiba*** 3, with Naoto Kiba making little more than a cameo appearance. Ryo is sent on a mission to guard Taiwanese star actress Shang Lee from her former manager. This man, a big game hunter who only has a few weeks to live due to cancer, is out to kill his former protégée for leaving his side and making it big on her own. He gets the help of the evil master Wang, who sends in a motorcycle gang to kidnap Shang Lee, but the plot is thwarted by Ryo. The actress, a stereotypically conceited star, quite predictably doesn't get along with her guardian, even though they eventually wind up in bed together (the sex scene is replaced by a rather surreal montage of fragments from porn videos and pictures from nudie magazines). After a series of attacks and kidnap attempts on Shang Lee, the story finally ends with the actress talking herself out of being killed by her manager (who hurls himself off a cliff instead), while Kiba and Daitô, who flew in from Tokyo just to be in this one scene, invade Wang's mansion and force him to call back his biker gang, who were about to fire a bullet into Ryo's skull with a snipers rifle.

Bodyguard Kiba 3 suffers from a lot of problems, but probably the most jarring is the film's extensive use of dubbed dialogue. All exchanges between Ryo and Shang Lee are in English, which is delivered in disinterested monotone with a heavy Japanese accent and a host of mispronunciations. It's also far from lip-synch. This isn't just restricted to these two characters, as most of the dialogue in the film – and its predecessor – is similarly dubbed (one of the voices belongs to Ren Ôsugi, who also dubbed Jack Kao in both English and Japanese in part 2).

There are some indications that this is all part of a big joke, as if both sequels are conscious parodies of bad martial arts films. Part 3 even contains two explicit winks at other films, though neither of them in the martial arts genre. The opening scene is an imitation of a cheap, post-John Woo Hong Kong action film (complete with wirework and murky cinematography), while the scene of Shang Lee's kidnapping inexplicably involves the bikers dressing up as the characters in Quentin Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs (1991) and strolling out of their hide-out in a carbon copy of that film's credit sequence (with Tomio Terada imitating *Little Green Bag* on the soundtrack). The first scene works, also because Shang Lee is an actress in precisely such action films, the second one is merely ridiculous.

How successful is a parody when it is worse than the films it's trying to send up? As a result of the bad writing, acting, dubbing, directing and editing, sitting through these two films is a major chore, even at running times of 65 and 72 minutes respectively. Hisao Maki's shortcomings as a scriptwriter were already evident from *A Human Murder Weapon* and the *Bodyguard Kiba* sequels do nothing to convince us of the opposite. But it's not just the scriptwriter who is at fault here. Whatever influence others may have had on him during the production of these two films, it's still Takashi Miike's name that is on the credits as their director.

If *Shinjuku* Outlaw can be regarded as the first work of Miike as an artist, then ***Daisan No Gokudô*** (1995) [lit: The third gangster] must be seen as the first film in which he integrates elements from his personal experiences. The extent of these touches is somewhat limited, since the film is a rather conventional addition to the yakuza genre, but the fact that the story is set in Osaka, the city where Miike grew up, allowed the director to draw from his own memories in portraying the characters.

Daisan No *Gokudô* was also the first Takashi Miike film to receive a theatrical release, as witnessed by the certificate from the Japanese film ratings board Eirin that follows the closing credits[3]. The film didn't get the proper multiple screen release of *Shinjuku Triad Society* later that same year, but it was nevertheless shown in a single theatre in Osaka, despite being originally intended only for a video release. This strategy would become increasingly common for V-cinema films from the mid-1990s onwards. As the public image of direct-to-video films began to dwindle due to an overabundance of inferior product, distributors started exploiting cinema releases as a label of quality for their films and a way to distinguish them from the glut of straight-to-video releases.

For *Daisan* No *Gokudô*, the director re-teamed with *Shinjuku Outlaw's* Kiyoshi Nakajo, who served in the dual capacity of actor and producer, the latter through his company Office Nakajo. Nakajo takes the lead role of Reijirô Masaki, main lieutenant to yakuza boss Daimon who adheres to strict codes of honour. The Daimon group is one of three powerful organised crime outfits in Osaka, but it is driven into a corner by a pact between the other two, the Tôdô and Takeda groups. Tôdô boss Hatori (Takuzo Kawatani) in particular is driven by a desire to see the Daimon group destroyed.Three Daimon underlings hand him the excuse on a silver platter: an argument with two Tôdô men in a seedy karaoke bar ends with one of the two being stabbed to death.

The stabbing starts off a gang war which quickly has Tôdô and Daimon men involved in tights, stabbings, assassinations and drive-by shootings all through the city. Meanwhile, the three original culprits are being kept hidden in a house on the outskirts of town. When Masaki's right hand man Miyagi brings them a supply of food, a Tôdô hitman enters the house behind him. The intruder kills the threesome but spares Miyagi, who did little to defend his colleagues and gets away with only a shot wound in the thigh. The reason for this soon becomes clear: Miyagi has made a deal with the Takeda group and is feeding them information on the whereabouts of top Daimon members.

This allows Masaki's rivals to get to him by using his weak point: his friendships with a number of non-yakuza people, which include mechanic Atsushi (Yoshiyuki Omori), printer Nagase and bar hostess Akemi. Atsushi is beaten up in his garage by Takeda men, but Masaki manages to intervene. Having his suspicions about Miyagi, Masaki ask another of his non-yakuza friends, a private detective called Sone. to tail him. Sone returns with pictures and an audio recording of Miyagi's meeting with Takeda, after which Masaki executes his former assistant on a rooftop. Atsushi is a witness to this coldblooded shooting and runs away from Masaki in disgust. That night he finds himself again the victim of the Takeda group, who beat him within an inch of his life and set fire to his garage. Badly hurt and with no place to go, Atsushi has no choice but to wander the streets, eating from garbage cans and stealing food from street vendors. Remembering that one of Masaki's friends is a printer, he rips out a page from the Yellow Pages and visits every single printer in Osaka until finally finding Nagase.

Meanwhile, Daimon has taken a drastic decision to avoid any more harm to his men: he disbands his group, leaving his men masterless, but safe from Tôdô aggression. With Atsushi re-united with Masaki, the now former yakuza concocts a plan to get back at Hatori. He asks the mechanic to transform a normal car into a police vehicle and has him, Nagase and Sone pose as cops to arrest Hatori. The plan works: they stop the Tôdô leader's Cadillac and apprehend Hatori, but Nagase's ink-stained fingers give him away. Nagase is shot (a sequence intercut with images of his little granddaughter riding her tricycle outside Nagase's printer's shop, again to create a contrast with the violence) as Sone and Atsushi drive away with the yakuza boss in their car.

The two men take Hatori into the woods, where Masaki forces him at gunpoint to dig his own grave. As the Tôdô leader stands in the pit, Masaki fires at him twice, missing on purpose. He then departs without saying a word, leaving Hatori to wallow in his anger and humiliation. Cut to two months later, when the gang war has died down and the Tôdô group has taken control of Osaka. Daimon has retired and spends the rest of his days watching his grandchildren grow up, while Masaki has gone to contemplate his future as a civilian at a seaside resort. Then one day a limousine shows up. Out steps Hatori, who asks Masaki if he would consider joining the Tôdô group as Hatori's right-hand man.

Although the ending of *Daisan No Gokudô* is clearly designed to pave the way for a follow-up (Miike made two sequels the following year, both of which we will examine in chapter 4), its open-ended nature also constitutes a rather refreshing break with the conventions of the yakuza genre in which the film finds its origins. Having both Daimon – the hero's father figure – and Hatori – the main villain – survive (not only that, Hatori even stops being a villain by asking Masaki to join him) is a resolute departure from genre expectations.

Daisan No Gokudô puts another spin on things through the role played by non-yakuza people[4]. Their presence adds dimension not only to the story but to the character of Masaki, who otherwise rather lacks personality. It's through these non-yakuza people that the director integrates some of his personal experiences and memories into the film, most evidently in the analogy between the character of Atsushi and Miike's own teenage ambitions to become a mechanic.

It's also worthy of note that nearly all of Masaki's friends are working class men, reflecting the environment in which the director grew up. Their black-stained fingers function as a symbol for their position in society, but also for a basic connection that exists between them as a result of that position. When Atsushi is *on* the streets after getting his garage burned down, it's the motor oil on his hands that reminds him of Nagase the printer, whose own ink-stained fingers will later spell his doom. Although the consistency with which it's employed makes it work, it is a rather simplistic form of symbolism. Similarly, Masaki's plot to get Hatori with the fake police car is in the context of a film like this naive if not completely silly,

Miike does however show that he has an eye for detail, as witnessed by the fact that most of the dialogue in the film is spoken in Osaka dialect (echoing *Bodyguard* K&a's use Of Okinawan dialect and preceding several Osaka-based films), by the candid footage of the city's homeless and by the use of ambient sound in several scenes (notably the opening scene). Thanks to such elements, *Daisan No Gokudô is not without imaginative* touches and interesting moments. But on the whole, it is told in a very linear fashion and directed with little sense of style, resulting in a film that is a bit too much like its protagonist: down-to-earth and lacking excitement and personality.

In total contrast to *Daisan* No *Gokudô's* straight-faced approach, the directors next film ***Naniwa Yûkyôden*** (1995) [lit: An Osaka tale of valiant men][5] is an irreverent parody of yakuza genre conventions. But despite the differences on the surface, *Naniwa Yûkyôden* retains the personal touches of its predecessor and expands them into a personal core that rests at the heart of the film's narrative.

The film is again set in Osaka and focuses on two local teenagers whose quest for easy money gets them unintentionally involved with the yakuza. For all its many moments of outrageous comedy, it's this focus on two teenagers which makes *Naniwa Yûkyôden* rise above the level of simple postmodernist genre parody. One gets the feeling that the two central characters Makoto and Eiji are not that far removed from the people Takashi Miike spent his own high school years with, or perhaps even from himself.

Yoshiyuki **Ômori,** who also played a Miike alter ego in *Daisan* No *Gokudô,* is Makoto, one half of a pair of layabout high school students with little interest in their education. With his friend Eiji (Kentarô Nakakura), he frequents bars and gets into scraps with hoodlums, on one occasion saving a girl called Keiko from being harassed by a group of thugs. When the boys do go to school – a place sliding down into complete anarchy – it's to extort money from the principal. Other teachers are too busy reading manga, smoking or steeping to interfere, while the music teacher supplies the scene with live piano accompaniment.

Only managing to squeeze 10,000 yen out of him rather than the desired one million, the boys nevertheless decide to hit town in celebration. Spotting a yakuza boss (Shingo Yamashiro from *Last Run)* going into a hostess club with several women in tow, they feel rich enough to do the same. After an evening-long binge, they are presented with a bill of precisely one million yen. Makoto and Eiji are unable to pay up and are chased out of the club by the bouncer, who turns out to be none other than blind swordsman Zatoichi, protagonist of a series of popular swordplay action films (*chambara*) from the 1960s.

Broke and severely hung over, the two boys think up new plans to make easy money when Eiji spots a job ad in the paper promising an income of 50,000 yen a day. The next day they head for the interview location – stealing the suits off two *salaryman's* backs on the way – which turns out to be a gloomy, dilapidated warehouse on the outskirts of town. With a mentally retarded teenager as their only competition, they figure they're home free until they realise that the interview is actually a recruitment ploy for the Kinsu yakuza group, which is led by the same gangster they saw at the hostess club.

Makoto and Eiji are quickly initiated into the group as trainee gangsters and are set to work washing the boss' gold-lined limousine, which is stolen from under their noses by the group's loose cannon member Taijo. Played to the hilt by Rikiya Yasuoka, the hulking, boozing, whoring, camouflage-clad Taijo takes the two *chinpira* with him on his joyride. They end up crashing the car, but Taijo takes a liking to Makoto and Eiji and drags them along on his nightly tours of the city's bars and hostess clubs, which invariably result in total chaos. At one of these clubs Makoto encounters Keiko again, the girl he and Eiji saved from being molested one night. With the building falling apart around them as a result of Taijo's deadly karaoke act, Keiko tells him she's auditioning for a part in a V-cinema movie the next day. Makoto later finds out that the film in question is in fact a bondage porn video, produced by a company controlled by a rival yakuza group. Makoto and Eiji steal a scooter and head for the location to save Keiko, who is at the same moment tied to a bed in her high school uniform and about to be violated by a ski-masked brute. Storming in just in time, the boys save Keiko

with help from Taijo, who had answered a call for a male actor in a porno movie and turns out to be the man in the ski mask.

Despite its emphasis on none too subtle genre parody, Naniwa *Yûkyôden* is a film which deals with the experience of growing up in Osaka (again using the city's dialect), teenage rebellion and the adolescent wish to become – and be regarded as – an adult. Makoto and Eiji's preference for bars, clubs and Osaka's nightlife instead of school, their fascination for the yakuza and their love of a good brawl -these are all attempts at being seen as adults. Invariably, their actions only serve to emphasise their inexperience and immaturity: they jump on bar hostesses in the belief that the women are prostitutes, can't afford the bill, while Eiji doesn't hold his alcohol well and usually ends up vomiting every drop he drank.

In its treatment of Osaka childhood, the film is a predecessor to some of the directors later works, in particular *Kenka* No *Hanamichi* and both *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* films. *Naniwa Yûkyôden* deals with theme of growing up and leaving childhood behind you for the more violent world of the adult. The effect of this violence is of course downplayed here by the comedy -the emphasis on which would decrease in each of the above films – but the film does stand as Miike's first exploration of the theme of childhood. It's not surprising then that he chose to do it in a setting he was so familiar with.

Although Naniwa *Yûkyôden* is episodic in structure, the parody is employed consistently, and the film delivers numerous digs at yakuza genre conventions and cliches: the gangsters have to resort to job ads to recruit new members, they wear women's underwear and hold their meetings in family restaurants full of screaming children. Nothing is sacred here, as a number of direct parodic references to other films attest, particularly the running joke of Taijo being chased all over town by Osaka's ugliest woman (shot as a direct visual and musical reference to James Cameron's *The Terminator*) and the appearance of Miike's childhood hero Zatoichi as a nightclub bouncer (receiving a face full of vomit courtesy of Eiji). Unlike in the highly uneven *Bodyguard Kiba* 3, here such references find the perfect context.

In one of the film's most inspired jokes, Miike directly plays with and pays tribute to the film's V-cinema origins: as the culmination of Rikiya Yasuoka's destructive karaoke act, in which equipment explodes and the entire nightclub nearly crumbles, the screen distorts and shakes and the letterboxed frame literally falls down, leaving first a black screen and then a malfunction notice. It's a joke which is only possible on video and forms a very knowing wink (or perhaps even a tribute) to the medium. The film's inspired irreverence is also reflected in the casting, particularly that of the two leads who play completely against type: comedian Ômori is the hero of the piece, while the more boyishly handsome Nakakura plays his bumbling, buffoonish sidekick.

The contrast in tone between *Naniwa Yûkyôden* and its immediate predecessor *Daisan No Gokudô* is not unusual in the light of earlier films. It was not the first time that Miike made a drastic switch of genre, nor would it be the last. However, in all earlier cases such a contrast was an indication of the unevenness of the director's work. This time, he changes direction and manages to maintain (and in fact improve) the quality of his work from one film to the next. With that and the film's thematic weight, *Naniwa Yûkyôden* marks the end of Takashi Miike's formative years and heralds the next step in his development as an artist.

The Outlaw Director (films 19952002)

SHINJUKU TRIAD SOCIETY

Shinjuku Kuroshakai – China Mafia Sensô

1995

Although *Daisan* No *Gokudô* was the first of Takashi Miike's films to be projected on a silver screen, the film was made as V-cinema and intended for a straight-to-video release. *Shinjuku Triad Society*, released later that same year, was the first film Miike made specifically for theatrical release. It also marked his first collaboration with production and distribution company Daiei[1], with whom he would re-team on numerous occasions, resulting in key films like *Rainy Dog*, Ley *Lines* and *Dead or Alive*.

Shinjuku Triad Society is the film in which the director's themes, concerns and style come to their full fruition and it should therefore be considered the turning point in not only his career, but also in his development as an artist. With this film starts the second phase of his work, a phase distinguished by an increasing consistency in thematic content, implementation of style and -with some shakes and starts -the overall quality of his work.

In many ways *Shinjuku Triad* Society is a continuation of the themes of *Shinjuku Outlaw* (for both films Miike teamed with screenwriter Ichirô Fujita and producer Toshiki Kimura), but with a more focused narrative and improved characterisations. *Shinjuku Outlaw's* protagonist Yomi was a stock character, an on the whole infallible hero whose interesting aspects (i.e. his rootlessness or sense of not belonging) were acquired through circumstance. The protagonist of *Shinjuku Triad* Society, Tatsuhito Kiriya (played by Kippei Shiina), is a continuation of *Shinjuku Outlaw*'s antagonist Tagami: a corrupt policeman deeply involved with and at ease in the criminal underworld of Shinjuku's nighttime entertainment district of Kabukichô, where he doggedly pursues the increasing presence of Chinese organised crime.

His introduction tells us all we need to know about his methods as a policeman in a single shot: arriving in his car for a raid on a nightclub, Tatsuhito opens his car door and a

tire iron falls out. He picks it up and hands it to his partner to use as a weapon just before they storm into the club.

The main suspect, a gay rent boy and part-time cocaine dealer named Shu, gets away, slashing a policeman's throat on his way out. The raid does results in two arrests, a Chinese man who was being served by Shu in the stairwell and a young Japanese woman named Ritsuko (Eri Yu) who helped Shu escape by hindering Tatsuhito in his pursuit. Both suspects are beaten by Tatsuhito during their interrogation. Ritsuko, seeing through the cop's temper, taunts him to rape her in the interrogation room. Realising she put him in his place, Tatsuhito vents his frustration by smashing her in the face with a metal chair (an act not actually shown; Miike cuts away to the title screen, a loud drum beat over the edit suggesting more than an image could show).

The reason for the cop's fierceness and his obsessive pursuit of the Chinese quickly becomes clear. Tatsuhito is a *zanryu koji*, the son of a Chinese mother and a Japanese father who was himself a 'war orphan'. Since he speaks Mandarin, Tatsuhito is now in charge of investigations into Chinese organised crime. A newspaper clipping on the wall of his parents' house reports on Tatsuhito's entry into the police force, with a headline that reads: "War orphan from China graduates from university and enters police". We see a glimpse of the article and a quote by Tatsuhito: "I am a Japanese" – it's a quote which indicates a false sense of confidence, a repression of his identity (or lack thereof) by assuming another. In the eyes of a cop who denies his Chinese heritage in order to succeed in Japan, a Chinese criminal deserves 'special' treatment.

This motivation is further enhanced by the fact that he takes bribes from the ruling Yamane yakuza group, who have more than a passing interest in ridding Kabukichô of the Chinese mafia. The bribe money habitually goes to Tatsuhito's parents, particularly to pay for the treatment of his father's pneumonia. It's one of the few things that still connect him to his family, whose three children have gone their decidedly separate ways. Tatsuhito has a sister whose existence is only glimpsed frbm a letter and a photograph of her and her infant son. His younger brother Yoshihito (Shinsuke Izutsu) is a lawyer and the uneasy, antagonistic relationship between the two isestablished when Yoshihito gets Ritsuko released from detention.

But Ritsuko's connection to the Chinese mafia is a close one, as she is the girlfriend of Karino (former boxer Takeshi Caesar, who made numerous appearances in the director's films in the second half of the 1990s), who is in turn the right-hand man of Shu-Ming Wang, a Taiwanese criminal whose gang is challenging the established order in Kabukichô with violent ferocity. Wang (played by Tomorowo Taguchi, who would also go on to feature in a large number of Miike's films) is an all-round sexual deviant: homosexual, exhibitionist and sadist. He is a man who tears out a woman's eyeball with his fingers, but who is at the same time deeply in love with his boyfriend, the rent boy Shu. (A very similar character would turn up several years later in the shape of *Ichi the Killer*'s Kakihara.)

Tatsuhito first learns about Wang through his second suspect, Shu's Chinese client. Though he at first refuses to speak anything but his own dialect, Tatsuhito eventually gets him to spill the beans in Mandarin by having him anally raped by one of his fellow detectives in the police gymnasium, away from prying eyes. It's another indication of Tatsuhito's own perversions, and the film asks the question who is worse: the criminal or the cop. Especially when Tatsuhito later rapes Ritsuko as a means to extract more information from her about

Wang, it becomes clear that while he and Wang are on opposite sides of the law, they are more than a little bit similar. Their similarities indicate that this is definitely not a story of good versus evil, that everyone exists in a state where the two concepts are decidedly blurry.

Using the information gained from the two suspects, Tatsuhito and his partner Shimada (Sabu) stake out Wang during his daily affairs and discover that Yoshihito is working for the Taiwanese gangster. Enraged, Tatsuhito chases their car on foot and manages to catch up with them at a traffic light. He is too exhausted to do anything, but the look he directs at Yoshihito through the windshield sums up all the resentment the cop feels for his younger brother.

The pictures of Wang taken by Shimada lead to a positive identification and further information about hi activities and past: Wang fled Taiwan after committing a murder and eventually turned up in Kabukichô where he is now involved in the smuggling of human organs. To this day he continues to financially support a hospital in his hometown.

The chance to investigate more presents itself when Tatsuhito is ordered to deport a Taiwanese prisoner to his homeland. Though his job is to only deliver the suspect to the local police and return to Japan, he seizes the opportunity to investigate into Wang's past and visits the hospital, where children are selling their internal organs to Wang's network for money.

Tatsuhito's companion on his investigations is a local cop who studied Japanese in university. Despite Tatsuhito's Chinese heritage, his dependence on a local guide is an indication that Tatsuhito's trip to Taiwan is not a simple case of going back to one's roots. Instead of roots, his character finds mostly differences and the only thing he recognises is a song he overhears a father sing to his children (in a later scene Wang sings the same song, once again emphasising the similarities between the two characters). This situation intensifies Tatsuhito's awareness of his lack of roots, also because his Taiwanese companion confronts him with his real history:Tatsuhito was born in China and didn't come to Japan until the age of sixteen, where he adopted his father's Japanese name in favour of the Chinese name he'd lived with for sixteen years. This forces Tatsuhito to face the fact that he has been living a lie ("I am a Japanese") for much of his life, and when he returns to Japan he does so with the realisation that he is neither Japanese nor Chinese and that the only group he belongs to is his immediate family. It's the turning point in the film and from this moment on his main motivation is no longer to rid the streets of Chinese gangsters, but to reunite his family and get Yoshihito out of Wang's grasp. But when his mother calls him to say that she hasn't heard from her youngest son in weeks and that he hasn't been showing up at this office, Tatsuhito realises that grasp has become stronger than ever. (This drive to rebuild the family unit would resurface in *Visitor Q* and *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, but the struggle between two estranged brothers as depicted here is an almost ultimate symbol for the disintegration of the family.)

As Tatsuhito begins his search for his brother, he soon realises that things have changed during his absence. Shimada has taken over his position of favour with the Yamane group's leader Ohe (Ren Ôsugi), while the yakuza themselves have actually teamed up with Wang and are now receiving a share of the profits from his organ smuggling business. When Tatsuhito visits the yakuza, he finds out about theses changes the hard way – he is beaten up badly by Ohe's men and delivered to Wang and Karino in the trunk of a car. Shot up with heroin, he is left to rot in a storage room, where Ritsuko finds him. The girl takes him to her

apartment and nurses him back to health. When Tatsuhito asks her why, she says that being with him was the first time she ever experienced an orgasm while not high on heroin. This moment is the film's major weakness. Aside from the moral objections one might have against a woman achieving orgasm through rape (it must be said that this is never depicted: only the start of the rape is actually shown, not the rest of it), the problem is that the entire conclusion of the film rests on Ritsuko helping Tatsuhito. and given his treatment of her in earlier scenes, her change of heart is-to say the very least – sudden.

In the meantime, Wang and Karino have killed Ohe and his top men for taking more than the agreed percentage of the profits, thus making Wang one of the most powerful men in Shinjuku. Back on his feet and with information from Ritsuko, Tatsuhito tracks down Karino. whom he kills (with a bullet in the groin) after the henchman tells him where Yoshihito can be found. He then locates Yoshihito in a decrepit apartment. When he tells his younger brother that he wants to take him away from Wang and bring him home to his parents, Yoshihito pulls a gun on him and says he has no interest in leaving. With the foolishness of youth, he says that he is just using Wang to his own ends. Tatsuhito tells him a man like Wang doesn't let himself be used, then tries to grab his brother's gun. A struggle ensues in which Tatsuhito beats his brother into submission. He throws the unconscious young man over his shoulder and puts him on a train to his parents' house, phoning his father that his son is on his way home ("He might be sleeping, so could you go into his compartment and wake him up?")

Tatsuhito makes his way into Wang's apartment, which is located above a pharmacy specialising in stamina drugs. There he finds – again creating a parallel between protagonist and antagonist – that Wang and Shu have just been in an argument and that Shu is unconscious on the bed with Wang washing the blood of his hands in the bathroom (Wang ound a knife under Shu's pillow, then proceeded to remove one of Shu's organs with it as punishment – it remains unclear exactly which organ). Tatsuhito fires several bullets into Wang's torso, but the gangster refuses to die. Even when the cop cracks a bottle over his read and sticks the broken glass into his jugular, Wang still crawls across the floor. Covered in blood from head to toe, he only gives up the ghost after Shu has grabbed his hand in a gesture of reconciliation.

The image of Shu wounded on the bed also opens *Shinjuku Triad Society,* accompanied by a voice-over in Mandarin, which tells us that this is a story about a love affair. What his voice-over does is make Wang and Shu the protagonists of the film, and turn Tatsuhito into a mere passer-by, a supporting character. This is emphasised by the voice-over that subsequently closes the film, which mentions in an almost off-hand way that Tatsuhito was killed in an alley not long after Wang's death. The death of a peripheral character deserves no more than a brief mention,

This mention of Tatsuhito's death also serves to tie up his own story. Throughout the film he has moved through the various stages typical for characters in Miike's film: he starts out a rootless man - a *zanryo koji* who isn't even a real *zanryu koji* – who sublimates his feelings of being an outcast in society through denial and outbursts of violence, and eventually tries to find happiness by forming (or in this case reuniting) the family unit. But in the nd, he undoes his own attempts to form that unit by not joining it. He is promised a promotion for his work in fighting organised crime and chooses to live his own solitary life. By not joining the safety of his family, he effectively initiates his own downfall.

Wang is also an outcast. Both in Japan and at home in Taiwan he is a wanted man. He searches for happiness in his relationship with Shu, who never truly loves him back and even attempts to kill him. Wang responds with violence himself and is killed very quickly thereafter by Tatsuhito. We have already noted similarities between the two men, and this also goes for the manner in which their fates are intertwined. The big difference between the two is that while Tatsuhito's entire character is based on matters of ethnicity and roots, Wang doesn't care about such things. When Tatsuhito lies bleeding in the trunk of a car, he tells Wang how as children, Yoshihito and he were imprisoned in a freezing cell in the middle of winter for something they didn't do. They were blamed for the simple fact that they were Japanese. He says it to justify his belief that Yoshihito belongs with him and not with Wang, but to Wang, such allegations mean nothing. "Yoshihito needs me and I offer him a place because I need him:' Wang replies before injecting the policeman with heroin. 'That's our connection." He thinks only in terms of mutual benefit, not background or identity.

The roads walked by both men result in violence. And in *Shinjuku Triad* Society that violence is everywhere and all-pervasive, regularly crossing the line into exaggeration. Particularly in the first half of the film and the opening minutes, in which Miike uses exaggeration to set the tone for the story. It's a tone of madness and chaos: a decapitated body in the streets, flashing police sirens, the raid on the nightclub – in one of Miike's now trademark montages, Shinjuku is presented as a world gone permanently mad (it would go just a little bit madder in the similar opening montage of Dead or *Alive* four years later), where a forensics officer poses with a severed head and a big smile. This is the black society *(kuroshakai)* of the film's Japanese title: a deranged world that lives side-by-side with our own without ever being noticed, right under people's noses or in the corners of their eyes, behind the facade of everyday life. A sequence early in the film expresses this perfectly. In a hand-held shot we follow Tatsuhito through a normal shopping street in Shinjuku, but instead of following the crowd he turns into a narrow, deserted alleyway, then into another alleyway where he finds a door behind which is located the Yamane group's illegal boxing ring. In the corners of our eyes..

This black society is a world of violence and vice, where murder, rape and mutilation are commonplace and where the turd you step in on the streets might well have come from a human being (as Tatsuhito's partner Shimada at one point experiences). It's exaggerated, certainly, but the depiction of this society demands exaggeration, as shown by the opening minutes of the film: when Shu cuts a policeman's throat and wrist, the blood spurts out in showers of red. A giant, orange-tinted moon hangs over the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building, home of the police force.

Such exaggeration is perfectly captured by director of photography Naosuke Imaizumi, whose saturated colours are functional here, where they were purely aesthetic in *Bodyguard Kiba.* The interior of the police station is caught in a cold blue, the predominance of yellow makes the Taiwan summer heat almost tangible, while the restless energy of Kabukichô jumps out in the reds and greens of the neon light.

The Kabukichô setting in itself functions in much the same way, its lights giving the place an unreal quality. It's an example of how the area symbolises myth in Miike's films, an effect achieved though little more than employing local colour. In this, *Shinjuku Triad Society* witnesses the director's increased attention for details in sets, people, locations and props. Much of the time, it's a case of turning the necessity of shooting wild in the streets into a

virtue. The absence of crowd control or closed-off streets could be regarded as a nuisance, but can also be turned to a filmmaker's advantage if the location happens to contain all the elements he is looking for. The accidental presence of such details in Miike's films is never truly accidental, since it was framed, recorded and edited in. This ability to use real life and coincidence to the film's advantage would become a trademark of the directors work, particularly in the many films set in Kabukichô.

JINGI NAKI YABÔ

1996

The next film Miike directed was again for the video market. Tôei Video, the founders o V-cinema, produced *Jingi Naki Yabô* [lit: Ambition without honour], a film whose title wa an explicit reference to the successful yakuza series *Battles Without Honour and Humanit* (original title: *Jingi Naki Tatakai*), directed by Kinji Fukasaku in the first half of the 1970 and also produced by Tôei. The film itself however bore little relation to Fukasaku's films the only connections being composer Toshiaki Tsushima (whose score does resembk his famous soundtrack for the *Battles* series) and actors Shinichirô Mikami, Nobuo Yan and Harumi Sone.

Sone, who had played the role of Soma in Miike's *Daisan No Gokudô* films, served a: producer on *Jingi Naki Yabô*. The film was an attempt to launch his son Hideki as a leadin man in V-cinema, an intention reflected in the story, which deals with a father-son relation ship and the gap between generations.

The younger Sone plays Tetsuya, a 17-year old *chinpira* of the Shiramatsu yakuzagroup who winds up in prison for seven years for stabbing the leader of the rival Tamazawa clan (a cameo by Sone senior). After his term is up, he is released in the pouring rain and picked up by his girlfriend Kayo (Naoko Amihama). They celebrate their reunion by making love ir the rain against the prison wall.

Kayo has matured in those seven years. She holds a job that has allowed her to save up and she intends to use the money to leave town and start a new life with Tetsuya. But the young man is eager to rejoin the Shiramatsu group, much to his girlfriend's dismay. When he visits the group's offices, Tetsuya receives far from the hero's welcome he had hoped for. The younger memoers of the group don't recognise him and it's only the presence of second-in-command Ishibashi (Kôjirô Shimizu) that prevents him from receiving a beating. In his conversation with Ishibashi, Tetsuya realises that things have changed during his absence. The war between Shiramatsu and Tamazawa that erupted in the wake of the assassination crippled the group, while the collapse of the bubble economy also had its effect on organised crime. Ordered to lay low by other yakuza factions, the Shiramatsu are now collaborating with their old enemy in an attempt to survive. Ishibashi gives Tetsuya a small sum of money as thanks for his service, but the group's leader mister Shiramatsu2 insists that Tetsuya is no longer welcome in the clan, since his presence might upset the Tamazawa group.

Ever since his mother died while he was in his early teens, Tetsuya has seen the organisation as his surrogate family. He never knew his father who he believes to be dead. In actual fact, his father is not only alive, but he is one of the top men of the Tamazawa clan, as we learn soon thereafter. This man, Shibayama (Shinichirô Mikami), was present when Tetsuya stabbed his boss seven years earlier and carries a huge scar across his left cheek to remind him of how Tetsuya slashed his face with the same knife that killed the boss. When he was a young man Shibayama was arrested himself, at a moment when his girlfriend - Tetsuya's mother -was pregnant. Visiting him in jail, she told him she'd had an abortion and that she would start a new life without Shibayama.

Driven by his wish to belong to a group, as well as Shiramatsu's old promise that he would be taken back into the clan after his sentence, Tetsuya persists in his attempts to rejoin the yakuza. When he turns up at a gambling den owned by the group, several Tamazawa men spot him and Tetsuya is thrown out by Ishibashi. Meanwhile, his stubbornness and immaturity are also affecting his relationship with Kayo, not helped by the fact that Tetsuya is spending more time with four of his old friends (one of whom is played by Yoshiyuki Ômori) than with her. But the fightswith his girlfriend only help to drive him further away from her and make him more determined to be re-adopted into the yakuza. This determination is symbolised by the suit he wears when he turns up at Shiramatsu's house the next day. Despite his effort, he is ignored by Ishibashi driving out of the gate in his limousine. The young man tries to block the street, but Ishibashi orders his chauffeur to keep driving, knocking over Tetsuya and landing him in hospital.

While Kayo sees this as the final straw, Tetsuya's friends hatch a plan to get back at the yakuza. As soon as Tetsuya is out of hospital, they take revenge through a series of pranks: they cause chaos in a yakuza-owned *pachinko* parlour, beat up any individual Shiramatsu members they find and hijack a top-ranking gangster's boat, throwing him overboard naked in a dingy, then sending pictures of the incident to Shiramatsu. (It's telling that Tetsuya fights back with adolescent pranks rather than guns, since being young these are the only weapons he and his friends have at their disposal -they cause humiliation rather than physical harm.)

When Tetsuya is ambushed in the streets and beaten up by Shiramatsu men, Shibayama comes to his aid. He advises the battered Tetsuya to leave town and gives him money, but doesn't reveal that he is the young man's father. When Shibayama asks him if he remembers his face, Tetsuya can't even recall that he cut Shibayama seven years ago. Stumbling off, Tetsuya encounters Fujisaki (singer Saburô Kitajima), a professional gambler presiding over the game play at the Shiramatsu gambling den. The only person within the group to take pity on him, he agrees to arrange a meeting with Shiramatsu in which Tetsuya can apologise. Against Fujisaki's advice to abandon his thoughts of becoming a yakuza, the boy hopes that this meeting will be his chance to be adopted into the group, exclaiming: "I never knew my father's face, the boss of Shiramatsu is my only father." When he meets Shiramatsu, the latter suddenly acts exactly like the father figure Tetsuya so dearly misses. He offers him sake as an advance to the 'real' initiation ceremony, which he promises will follow soon.

The fact that Tetsuya can't see he is being used is the film's weakest aspect; his naïve persistence is too strong and his need to find a father figure becomes too much of an all-purpose excuse. He is very easily won over with a kind word from an elder or a sumptuous meal, which Shiramatsu has waiting for him the next night. The old man's invitation is enough to drag Tetsuya away from the impromptu wedding ceremony his friends organised in an effort to bring him and Kayo closer together.

Inevitably, during their private copious dinner the gangster asks him to assassinate the leader of the Tamazawa clan. Tetsuya's attempt to do so is foiled by Shibayama, who jumps in front of his boss and catches the bullet, much to Tetsuya's horror (he may not know the man is his father, but he certainly sees him as a father figure).The young man flees and hides out in an abandoned building. Shiramatsu, under pressure from the Tamazawa group who suspect him of being behind the assassination attempt, says Tetsuya acted alone in attempt to get back into the organisation.

Enka singer Saburô Kitajima in the role of father figure Fujisawa.

Tetsuya calls up Kayo in an effor to reconcile their differences. She looks him up but is followed to his hide ouf by Shiramatsu's *men, who were* ordered to kill him. *In* the ensuing shoot-out, *it's* Kayo *who is hit by their bullets. Taking her with* him to his friends' *place, Tetsuya* finds that they too have been slaughtered by Shiramatsu's men and that only his best friend **Jôji (Ômori)** is still alive. He calls an ambulance, then goes *out* for revenge. Attempting to interrupt a ***harbour-side*** meeting between *the* Shiramatsu and Tamazawa groups, he is stopped by Fujisaki. When Tetsuya tells him what happened, the gambler takes his side. Together they burst into the hangar and attack every gangster present. Symbolising the ways of the young and the old, Tetsuya uses a gun and Fujisaki a sword. That the latter should wield a sword is typical for his character, the type of honourable gangster that was so in vogue in yakuza films of the **1960s[3].** It's as if Fujisaki has survived those days and still clings to their **methods.** Though Tetsuya uses a gun, he is not so much presented as a contrast to this **honourable** yakuza prototype, but as a new version of it.This is witnessed by the moment when Fujisaki, just before dying of his wounds, throws the young man his sword. By doing so, he passes on the legacy to a younger generation and the badly hurt Tetsuya continues to fight using only Fujisaki's sword.

Making his way towards Shiramatsu, he is confronted by an injured Ishibashi, who pretends to hold an invisible sword with which he will engage Tetsuya. Again, the sword is used as a symbol for honour, as Ishibashi is also a man of his word, whose betrayal of Tetsuya was not by choice but the result of his boss' orders. Tetsuya slashes Ishibashi's face, then kills Shiramatsu before expiring of his own wounds. An epilogue sees **Jôji** caring for Tetsuya's grave, which is placed beside that of his mother. Shibayama, the man who buried him, looks on while supporting himself with crutches.Tetsuya's bullet wasn't fatal and he survives his own son (his wound was furthermore convenient as it avoided the need to set up a father-son confrontation in the finale). Finally the film cuts to the interior of a hospital where we find another survivor. Ishibashi. The cut of Tetsuya's sword has left a scar running diagonally across his face. He is greeted in the hallway by several dozen surviving Shiramatsu and Tamazawa men and is now the new boss.

As previously noted, at the heart of ***Jingi Naki Yabô's*** narrative lies the generation gap. The story is Tetsuya's search for a father figure. His real father won't reveal himself,

Shiramatsu only uses him, but it is Fujisaki who in the end fits Tetsuya's ideal, fighting side by side with him when the boy has finally realised that he has been used. Tetsuya's immaturity is not only a bother to Shiramatsu (the unfinished tattoo on the young man's back symbolises his status as an outcast vis-a-vis the yakuza – he neither is nor will ever be a full member), but also to his relationship with Kayo. They may be the same age, but she has grown more mature than him by having had to fend for herself during the seven years Tetsuya spent in jail.

This immaturity is the character's other motivating factor, but the combination of the two is too much of a good thing. Tetsuya's naive determination is the film's undeniable weakness and the fact that it's so central to the story makes it impossible to overlook. Although its main character is another typical Miike outcast, this weakness and the film's unremarkable handling on a stylistic level make *Jingi Naki Yabô* at best an average entry in the director's filmography. Something emphasised by the success of Miike's next exploration of the clash between young and old – *Fudoh:* The New *Generation,* made later that same year.

PEANUTS

Peanuts – Rakkasei

1996

It has already been noted how a number of Miike's previous films were marred by the flatness of their protagonists. Peanuts, one of six films the director made in 1996, is again constructed in a similar manner.The film essentially marks a return to the formula of Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai: a small group of misfits, who make up with their fists for what they lack in brains, help the underdog tight evil and injustice – resulting in hefty doses of action and comedy.

The misfits here are Kyôtarô (Riki Takeuchi) and Ryuji (Kôyô Maeda), a pair of ne'er-do-well brothers – the title refers to them being "two peanuts in one shell" – who like to live the high life and always dress in suits and hats (recognisable costumes are another requirement for flat characters, cf. the overalls and angel-winged caps of Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai). After a winning bet at the racetrack they use their gains to buy a bright red Cadillac convertible, but are schemed out ot their money by a chinpira posing as a car salesman. The two tall for the same trick again when a pair of busty ladies they pick up in their new convertible slip sedatives into their drinks and rob them blind.

Despite not being the two smartest men on earth, the brothers have their hearts and their fists in the right place and use them to help Makimura, an aging grocery store owner heavily indebted to a yakuza card shark. The criminals looted his shop and kidnapped his daughter to force him to sign a loan contract. Moments after singing it he tries to kill himself by jumping in front of Kyôtarô's Cadillac. The two men decide to help him by raiding the yakuza's gambling den and giving all the money to Makimura. Their use of squirt guns to rob the place fits in with the formula applied here, since the fact that the protagonists never use real guns and always rely on their fists keeps them sympathetic and in the position of underdogs.

Their fisticuffs don't go unnoticed. A debt collector named Fukuda offers them a job in his company and they are put on the case of businessman Sugiyama, who owes 2.5 million yen to a yakuza-controlled hostess bar in Ginza. This place would normally be out of reach for a man in Sugiyama's position, but rumour has it that he has additional income from smuggling drugs into the country on his foreign business trips. They discover that mister Makimura's daughter is working in Sugiyama's office. When she and Kyôtarô fail in love soon thereafter, the young woman agrees lo help him. Invited by Sugiyama to escort him on his next business trip, she steals the bag of cocaine he carries with him and hands it to Kyôtarô upon their return.

As replacement for the money Sugiyama owes them, they take the drugs to Fukuda and his yakuza clients, the Kurogane group (who turn out to be the same clan to which Makimura was indebted). Their leader (played by Kenji Imai, who portrayed yakuza boss Shiramatsu in *Jingi Naki Yabô*) is a man with personal problems: his daughter Yukari fell in love with a black American student named George, with whom she now has a child. Feeling disgraced, he wants Yukari to leave her boyfriend, but his daughter says she will leave her father instead and start a new life with George. Kurogane then decides to have the American killed.

Around the same time, Kurogane's right-hand man Takakura discovers that Kyôtarô and Ryuji are the same men who raided their gambling den. They capture the two men and force them to kill George as a way to repay for the robbery. To show that they mean business, they kidnap miss Makimura again. The plan backfires when Kyôtarô tricks them, gets George to a safe place and saves his girlfriend. In the ensuing shoot-out, Kyôtarô kills Takakura and his henchmen.

Here the film breaks the rules it has set for its own protagonists: having Kyôtarô kill the yakuza with a gun goes against his character and against the tone of the film (the shootings are too serious in tone and too bloody in comparison to the rest). It's a very uncharacteristic thing for the character to do • in order to round off the story, director and writer have chosen to go against the character's established behaviour, resulting in a very jarring finale. It's all the more bothering because there is no change in the character to justify it: he goes back to his grinning, happy-go-lucky old self in the next scene, in which Yukari and George have been brought to safety, miss Makimura and Kyôtarô are re-united and all the protagonists drive off into the sunset in their Cadillac as if nothing had happened. How much more flat can characters get?

The two heroes, flat as they may be, are likeably performed by Takeuchi – by then already one of the biggest stars of V-cinema yakuza films, here in his first of several collaborations with the director-and Maeda -- who played a nearly identical sidekick character to Takeuchi's rival V-cinema star Show Aikawa that same year, in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's six-part series Suit Yourself *or* Shoot Yourself (*Katte Ni Shiyagare!!*, 1995-96). What lets the film down most is its impromptu approach to plotting. The story consists of three consecutive and entirely separate plot strands (Makimura's debt, Sugiyama's debt and the murder plot on George), which are tied together in rather unlikely fashion: first by miss Makimura's association with Sugiyama, then by the sudden appearance of Fukuda (plus the improbability of the two men accepting a job that will connect them with the yakuza) and finally by the introduction of Kurogane's daughter Yukari.

Peanuts' low budget is reflected in the sparsely dressed and lit sets, as well as in the fact that the film was shot on video (the first time Miike used video since *A Human Murder Weapon).* On a stylistic level it has little to offer, except one inspired piece of editing: Miike at one point juxtaposes two scenes in which the simultaneous, but separate activities of the two protagonists are shown.The interest lies not so much in the juxtaposition itself, but more in the way the transition between the scenes is handled. The first has Kyôtarô held at gunpoint by two Kurogane men. At the moment when he is punched in the face, the director cuts to a medium close-up of a naked women falling onto a bed. By having the sound of the punch overlap the edit, he creates the expectation that the second scene is the kind of perfunctory rape scene so often employed in V-cinema gangster films. However, it turns out that the second scene involves Ryuji making love (consensually and passionately) with his new girlfriend, the same woman he will later ride off into the sunset with in the backseat of Kyôtarô's Cadillac.

This edit, which first sets up then trips up the expectations of the audience, gives a hint as to how Miike would later use montage and sound effects to influence audience perception, particularly in *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer.* It's one of the few points of interest in an otherwise unremarkable film.

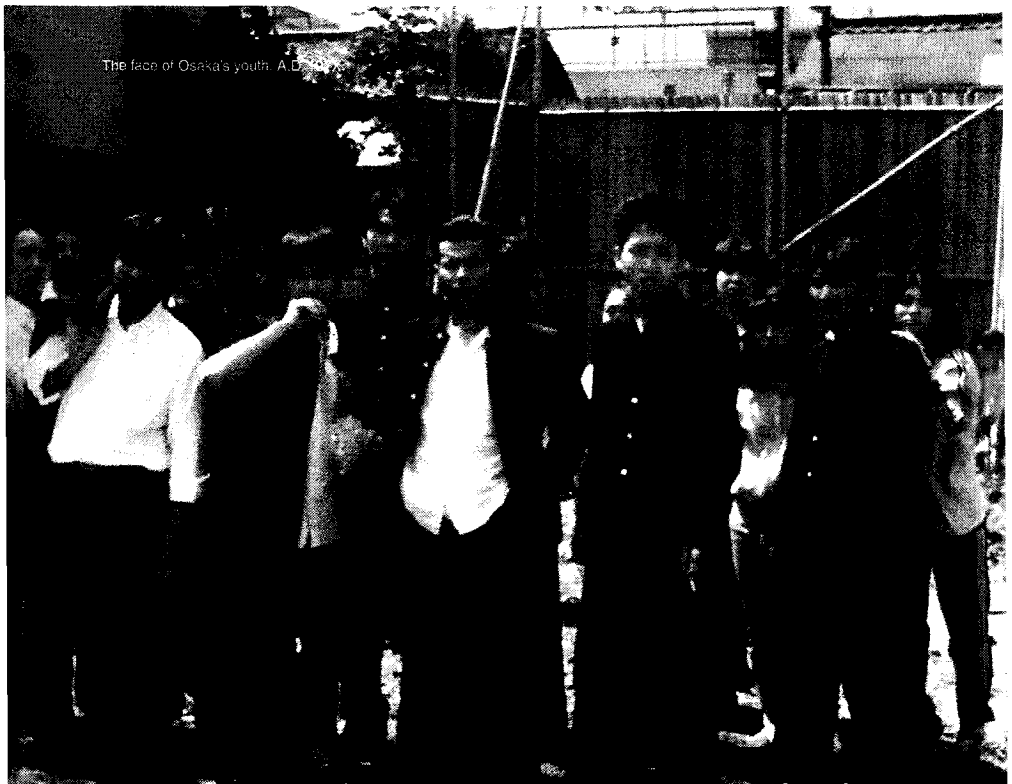
KENKA NO HANAMICHI - ÔSAKA SAIKYO DENSETSU

1996

Perhaps even more so than *Shinjuku Triad Society, Kenka No Hanamichi - Ôsaka Saikyo Densetsu* [lit: The road to the fight-legend of Osaka's strongest][4] represents a crucial turning point in Miike's career. Whereas the 1995 film was followed by a string of forgettable, unambitious efforts, from *Kenka* No Hanamichionwards such mediocre entries would become incidents rather than rule.

It's not entirely coincidental in this light that the film marked Miike's first collaboration with a number of key crew members who would go on to become his regular associates. Chiefly among them was cinematographer Hideo Yamamoto, a former fellow freelancer from Miike's days in television who would go on to lens the majority of the director's post-1996 films. Another notable name is that of screenwriter Masa Nakamura, whose script for *Kenka* No Hanamichidemonstrated that he shared the directors affinity for portraying childhood. Thirdly, this film saw the return of *Shinjuku Triad* Society's editor Yasushi Shimamura, who has worked on nearly every film the director has made since.

Even though it was a V-cinema production like its immediate predecessors, *Kenka No Hanamichi* showed a Takashi Miike working on the level he displayed with *Shinjuku Triad* Society.That it concerned a subject close to his heart no doubt had an influence on his performance as a director. Focusing on teenagers growing up in suburban Osaka in the 1970s,


The face of Osaka's youth. A.D. 1970

Kenka No *Hanamichi* harked back to, and improved and expanded upon, the themes of *Naniwa Yûkyôden*. But where the latter film functioned within the confines of a genre parody, *Kenka No Hanamichi* is entirely free from such constraints. As a result, the film creates the template for Miike's depiction of nostalgia and the childhood idyll, which he would go on to explore on numerous occasions to follow.

The depiction of childhood for Miike is almost irrevocably tied to Osaka. The film is entirely delivered in Osaka dialect and its characters adhere strongly to the popular image of Osaka people as brawny and down-to-earth. The film's two lead characters, antagonistic delinquents Kazuyoshi (Kyôsuke Yabe) and Takeshi (Yasushi Kitamura), take that image to extremes as obnoxious brawlers ready to pummel any poor sap who gets in their way. But it's through the more subtle personalities of Kazuyoshi's friends Toshio (Tomohiko Okuda), who reads Shakespeare by the riverside, and Ritsuko (Ryôko Imamura), a girl from Tokyo who is very unimpressed with Kazuyoshi's vulgar displays of power and tells him his dialect makes her ears hurt, that Miike balances the main characters' machismo and big-headedness.

Set in Osaka, 197X (the indistinct time is a suitable statement of nostalgia), we are introduced to Kazuyoshi when he effortlessly beats up a group of bullies menacing his friend Toshio. Following this, we meet Takeshi, a student from another school, pounding the same bullies with possibly even more ease. With the juxtaposition of the two characters in similar situations, the stage is immediately set for a clash between these two brawlers that will decide who is Osaka's strongest. Both dressed in the baggy variation of the high school uniform favoured by teenage gangster-wannabes (an outfit known as the *gakuran*) and sporting a 'punch' perm[5], Yabe and Kitamura play the pair to the hilt, and their exaggerated mannerisms accentuate the youthful ignorance of the characters. Like he did in *Naniwa Yûkyôden*, Miike wastes little opportunity to contrast his lead characters' outward posturing with their own immaturity. Throughout the film Kazuyoshi and Takeshi are, like the bully they themselves beat up in the opening minutes, repeatedly put in their place. Kazuyoshi's image suffers from Ritsuko's constant taunts (tripping him up as he strides triumphantly across the schoolyard, drawing a moustache on his face with a black marker while he sleeps), while his grandmother is tougher than he is and regularly gives him a sound beating with any object at hand. Takeshi, in an attempt to assert his power, challenges a karate student to a duel but is mercilessly beaten. He decides to join the karate school, but finds that all his fellow students are little children and that the lessons resemble kindergarten more than martial arts classes. (Interestingly, this situation teaches Takeshi humility, which is something Kazuyoshi will never have. As a result, the antagonist becomes a more sympathetic character than the protagonist.)

On one level, Miike allows his characters their postures. A bit of machismo is okay if you're a man, the message seems to be — especially if you're a man from Osaka. Hence the wraparound story set in the 1990s (199X) which shows that the two are still fighting 20 years later: one a boxing champ, the other a professional wrestler, they have made brawling and machismo their livelihood and have done so very successfully.

On another level, Miike does not indulge in their machismo. He balances it with a great amount of context, allowing the other characters ample space to live their lives (at 117 minutes, this was the director's longest film at that point, owing to the room given-to supporting characters). While Kazuyoshi and Takeshi only have eyes for each other, life goes on around them. Toshio falls in love with Ritsuko but doesn't tell her of his feelings, too

ashamed of having to confront her with his mentally ill father, a man who walks around town with a cart covered in paper propellers, Takeshi's factory worker father is a depressed alcoholic whose relationship with his son and young daughter is severely strained.

In one particular sequence, Miike juxtaposes the simultaneous activities of the various characters on the same night: Ritsuko is too distracted to do her homework, lies down on her bed and attempts to masturbate before she is interrupted by her mother. Toshio, unable to pick up the phone to call her, visits a prostitute in a desperate attempt at intimacy but he too fails to reach a climax. Meanwhile Kazuyoshi is again put in his place by his grandmother and Takeshi vents his anger over years of intoxicated insults by beating up his father.

After his disastrous night, Toshio finally does muster up the courage to talk to Ritsuko, but instead of telling her about his feelings he clumsily asks her whether she's in love with Kazuyoshi. Puzzled by his question, she replies that she wants to continue the friendship between the three of them.

Toshio's broken heart and the shame he feels for his own behaviour are the introduction to the film's depiction of the end of childhood. On his way home from school, Toshio is beaten up by a thug who threatens him with a knife. When Toshio asks the punk to kill him and take him out of his misery, the assailant runs off and leaves his knife behind. That same night, Toshio uses the blade to stab one of the factory workers making fun of his father's mental illness. [Takashi Miike himself plays the victim, making an appearance in his own film for the first time. See chapter 5: Stray Dog for more details on the director casting himself.) As the man lies dying on the pavement, Toshio flees. Before boarding the train, he finally calls Ritsuko to reveal his feelings and say his farewells. Without his friend, Kazuyoshi is at a loss and starts venting his anger by indiscriminately beating other kids, thus losing his innocence through disillusionment. At the same time Takeshi's father commits suicide over the strenuous relationship with his son. Takeshi decides to pack up and head for Tokyo, to take a shot at becoming a professional wrestler.

With all this attention to the characters' lives, the clash between Kazuyoshi and Takeshi is increasingly pushed to the background. The first meeting between the two fails due to a miscommunication about time and place, then the two keep missing each other until finally Takeshi, as a result of joining the karate classes and the problems with his father, loses interest. The clash is a pure MacGuffin: what seems like the subject of the story is in fact a tool for showing something else, in this case the lives of teenagers growing up in Osaka. Ttie truth is in the title: the film is called the road to the fight, not the fight itself. Miike sets up his MacGuffin in an exemplary way: through the introduction of Kazuyoshi and Takeshi and the failed attempt at arranging the fight, he creates the anticipation that carries the audience along into the film.

But when Takeshi decides to leave for Tokyo, he challenges – or rather invites, as a kind of farewell celebration – Kazuyoshi to a fight. At last the adversaries find themselves toe-to-toe, surrounded by dozens of excited spectators of all ages. But before either can land a punch, a scuffle in the crowd leads to a massive brawl in which everyone tights everyone else, at the center of which Kazuyoshi and Takeshi watch in astonishment. Involving adults, teenagers and children, boys and girls, everyone involved in this free-for-all gives and takes in equal doses with a smile on their faces.

With this scene Miike establishes his own portrayal of the childhood idyll and the Concept of the invulnerability of the child. Fighting no longer equals violence and pain, but

liberation. It represents the liveliness and energy of childhood. That Kazuyoshi and Takeshi don't get to fight each other is irrelevant. Instead, they join in the fracas with equal glee – it's not who you fight, it's that you fight. And enjoy it. Two old men in the crowd comment on how much fun there is to be had in life, as they watch Kazuyoshi and Takeshi take their positions. When the big brawl commences, they join in with enthusiasm as if reliving their own childhoods. For them, fighting is nostalgia. Although they are many years younger, the same goes for the two protagonists. Having both left childhood behind them and knowing that they will have to move on, joining this battle royale is their last act as children and they gleefully immerse themselves in it. The big brawl becomes a celebration of childhood.

The epilogue of the aforementioned wraparound, set in the '90s, shows the impact of the brawl on the adult lives of the various characters. Thanks to their embracing of the event, they have all retained their childhood selves. None of them have really moved on and are very happy with that fact. This includes Kazuyoshi and Takeshi, now professional fighters about to finally duke it out between themselves in a live televised match from Tokyodome, a match for which all of Osaka is glued to their TV screens. The only exception is Toshio, who wasn't present when the big brawl took place and who has gone on to become a petty drug dealer. On the run from the yakuza, he meets the spirit of Kazuyoshi's dead grandmother (immediately following the brawl, her death was the last shot before the film segued back into the wraparound), who reminds him of what he left behind. (This dialogue scene is shot in the streets without crowd control, but unlike *Shinjuku Triad Society* it suffers from the distraction of a multitude of onlookers staring into the camera in the background. Miike would become much more versed at manipulating crowd reactions in later films like *Ley Lines*, *Dead* or *Alive* and *Graveyard of Honour*.)

The wraparound sequence, in the prologue section, also reveals another aspect of Toshio: for one brief moment we hear him speak Korean. There is no hint at any other moment in the film that he is of Korean descent, which would seem incongruous. However, the original plan for the character of Toshio had been to make him Korean, an idea dropped when the film's distributor felt that the scene of him killing the factory worker would have been too risky. Instead of making fun of Toshio's father for being insane, the labourers would have mocked him for being Korean. Ethnicity was replaced by insanity, but with that one line in the film's opening scene it seems as if Miike, especially knowing his affinity for the ethnic outcast, wasn't quite of the same opinion as his distributor.

Though based on a novel by sports writer Seijun Ninomiya, Miike's personal attachment to the subject matter is evident, shining through in small details like the rugby match taking place in the school grounds during Toshio and Ritsuko's emotional conversation. This approach of merging his own memories with those of another person would again be apparent in the two *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* films, which continued the directors exploration of the theme of childhood and are once again set in 1970s Osaka.

FUDOH: THE NEW GENERATION

Gokudô Sengokushi: Fudô

1996

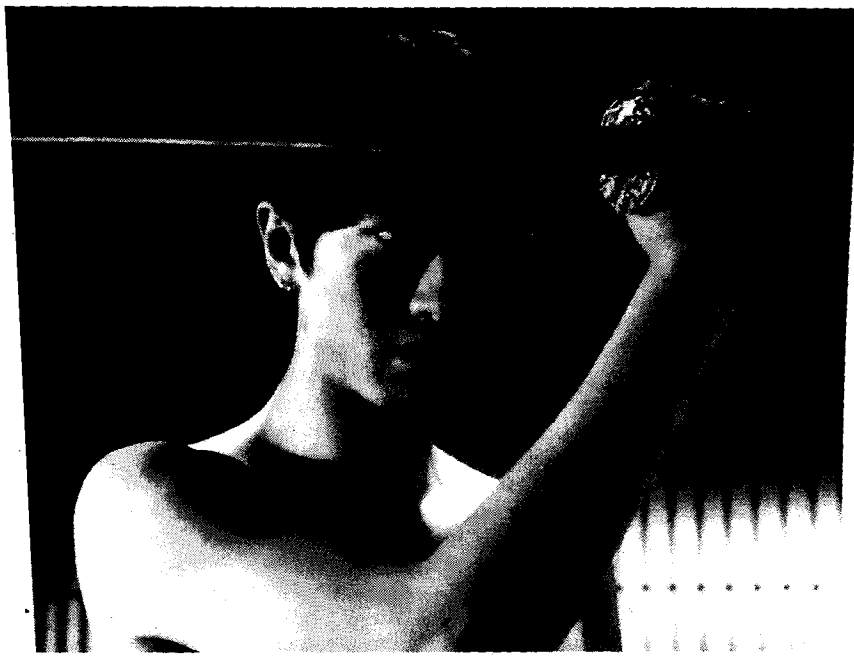
Fudoh: The New Generation was originally intended for a V-cinema release. But it was while watching the rushes that one of the producers felt the film was too good to go straight to video. As a result *Fudoh* premiered in theaters instead. The mark-up was most deserved, since the symbiosis Miike achieved between form and content in this film is on a par with *Shinjuku Triad* Society.

Thematically the film is a continuation of his two previous works. Like *Kenka No Hanamichi* it focuses on teenagers at the end of childhood, but mostly it expands and improves upon *Jingi Naki Yabô*'s theme of the generation gap. These concerns here are combined into an ultimate form: murder within a family – the father kills his eldest son, the youngest son in turn wants to murder the father in retribution.

The family in question is a yakuza dynasty named Fudô, from the city of Hakata on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. Iwao Fudô (Tôru Minegishi) is one of the five group leaders in the Niô organisation, the islands ruling crime outfit headed by a pair of identical twin brothers (Takeshi Caesar in a dual role). Fudô's eldest son Ryû functions as his right-hand man, but he makes the mistake of having a hitman from the rival Yasha group – based in Kobe on the mainland – killed in retaliation for the murder of a Nib agent. The hitman's death brings the Yasha and Niô groups to the brink of a gang war and Fudô is forced to make a drastic gesture to apologise to both his superiors and the Yasha group's leader Daigen Nôma (Riki Takeuchi). Without flinching, Fudô kills his son Ryû and offers the head to his four fellow group leaders. The decapitation, which took place while Ryû was sleeping, was witnessed by Fudô's seven-year old son Riki, who also spies on the handover of his brother's head the next morning.

We jump forward ten years by means of a dissolve: Riki sits in the hallway outside his father's conference room and dissolves to leave an empty corridor. After this the adolescent Riki fades in, sitting in exactly the same spot. The little boy has become a young man (Shôsuke Tanihara) who gets up from the floor and enters the conference room where Riki's father gave his son's head to his colleagues. The room is deserted, but still contains the table upon which Ryû's head rested, as well as an altar in his memory. Stepping back into the hallway, Riki sees his father and mentions the upcoming tenth anniversary of Ryû's death. Iwao Fudô says he nearly forgot, then laughs and continues his way to the front door.

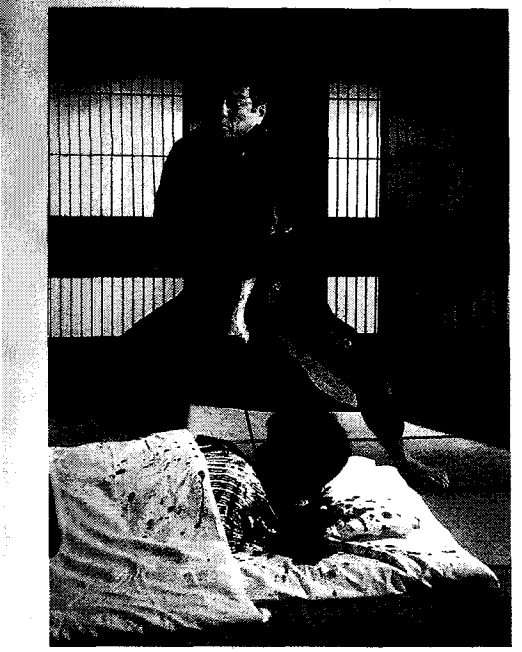
In these three moments (the dissolves, the room and the meeting in the corridor), Miike tells us everything we need to know about the character of the adolescent Riki and his relationship with his father. Partially this is done through dialogue, but mostly through visual means. The dissolves obviously represent the passing of time, but also serve to directly juxtapose Riki the boy with Riki the adolescent. In other words, he is a child no longer - his childhood (represented by the little boy in shorts) is behind him.The fact that he goes into the room shows his continued affection and attachment to his dead brother, while the non-verbal performances during the conversation with his father (the conversation tells



Stills of Fudoh: The New Generation courtesy of Japan Shock DVD. Entertainment. © 1996 Tohokushinsha

us only that ten years have passed) show that Riki has kept his knowledge of the murder a secret all these years. The cold and detached nature with which he addresses and regards his father and the latter's nonchalant reaction indicates that there is an unbridgeable gap between them, a wound that will never again heal but of which only Riki is fully aware. This distance between father and son shows that witnessing the murder of his brother has effectively made Riki an orphan: resentment has replaced the family bond. (Additional information that Riki felt closer to his brother than to his father in the first place was already given earlier, again through visual means: in the opening scene its Ryû who's playing baseball with his little brother. He briefly interrupts the game for business -ordering the death of the Yasha hitman – but resumes playing afterwards, while the father is absent and totally consumed by business affairs. A few scenes later we see father and sons sitting at the dinner table – Fudô on one side and his sons opposite him. Each party is framed by a set of blood red flames on the wallpaper behind them, a pattern which not only physically separates the father from the sons, but also indicates their antagonistic positions.)

Tanihara's performance as the adolescent Riki is one-note, but it is supposed to be. Riki's main motivation and emotion is his hatred for his father and, in extension, for all male authority figures. He wears a high school uniform which doesn't so much symbolise his immaturity as his position as a non-adult – even though he is no longer a child, the uniform separates him from those authority figures. The characters singular frame of mind should



Opposite page
Riki (Shôsuke Tanihara) swears revenge.

Left
Iwao Fudô (Tôru Minegishi) sacrifices his eldest son.

not be mistaken for lack of depth. The changes he goes through as he grows up from boy to adolescent are drastic, and the fact that the director manages to inform us of those changes in a single scene with hardly any use of dialogue represents an important moment in Miike's development as a filmmaker.

Riki's loathing for male authority figures is confirmed in his next scene, in which his English teacher begs Riki on his hands and knees to give him some respite in the payment of several million yen extortion money.The young Fudô has built his own criminal organisation in school, whose members consist of two female students and a group of little boys (who are all roughly the same age Riki was when he witnessed his brother's murder). His goal with this group is not only to revenge Ryû's death, but also to take over organised crime on Kyushu. Riki sends out his underage underlings to eliminate his fathers four fellow Niô group leaders, which they do most convincingly. The first is shot in the head by two little boys after baseball practise. The second is taken care of as he sits handcuffed in the back of a police car. When the car stops for gas, Riki's classmate Toko (Tamaki Kenmochi) - dressed as one of the attendants - gives him a cup of coffee containing a toxin. Within seconds, blood starts spurting uncontrollably out of his every orifice. The third victim is dispatched by Toko's friend Mika (Miho Nomoto), a female student who has a career on the side as a nightclub stripper. Her very popular act involves shooting darts through a blowpipe inserted into her vagina. Normally using it to blow up balloons, in the middle of her act she shoots one through the

Left: Mika (Miho Nomoto) hones her skills at the local strip joint.
Right: Ms. Miroku (Marie Jinno) defies Riki's power.

onlooking Nib leader's head – in the one ear and out the other. The fourth leader is gunned down with an Uzi by Toko, this time posing as a delivery girl to get into the gangster's office.

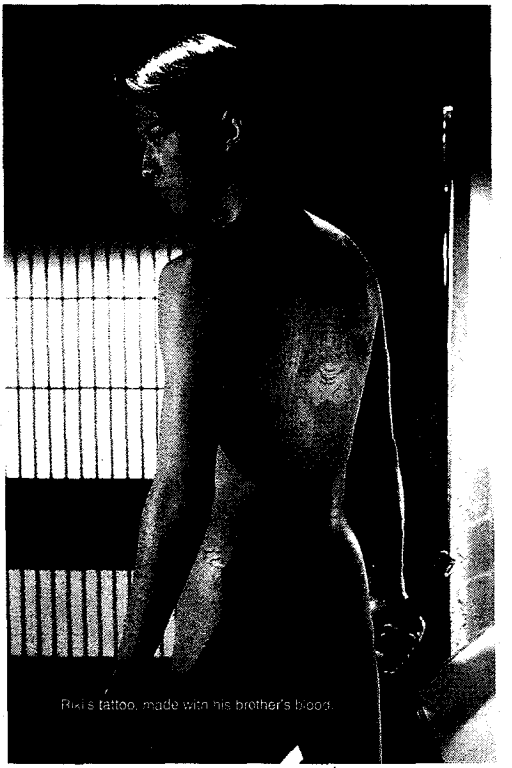
The way these murder scenes are executed is representative of the film's style. Like in Shinjuku *Triad* Society, exaggeration is the main stylistic device here and it is used to great success in complementing the content. The unlikely premise of seven-year olds and high school girls in a blood feud with the yakuza is fully acceptable to the viewer, because the form is as exaggerated as the content. When the second gangster drinks his poisoned cup of coffee, he doesn't just bleed, but all the blood spurts out of his body, inundating his fellow passengers and gushing out in gallons when the car door is opened.The dart that pierces through somebody's head lodges in the wall with a chunk of brain tissue attached to it. But exaggerated does not necessarily mean extreme. The flames on the dining room wallpaper and the orange moon that shines on the night Ryû is killed are equally representative of the style, as is Hideo Yamamoto's cinematography, which recalls Naosuke Imaizumi's work on *Shinjuku Triad* Society with its intense colours and rich blacks.

The exaggeration in both form and content allows for the creation of a surrealist (in the literal sense of the word) world, which although comparable to the effect achieved in Shinjuko *Triad* Society goes a step further by creating an alternative reality rather than a society that exists side-by-side with our own. *Fudoh* takes place in no world we will ever see.

Riki's group is expanded through the introduction of a new student, a giant by the name of Aizome (wrestler Kenji Takano playing the same image of primal, brutal masculinity previously provided by Rikiya Yasuoka in *Oretachi Wa Tenshi Ja Nai* and *Naniwa Yûkyôden*). Although the scene seems set for a confrontation with Riki, as soon as the young man learns that Aizome murdered his own parents when he was still a child, he invites him to join his organisation. Riki shows him (and thereby the viewer) around the training camp he has set

up outside town, where little boys learn to use guns, knives and explosives with deadly precision (and play football with the English teacher's head). That same night Aizome helps Riki invade the Nib temple and kill the group's two top bosses (one of whom he finds sleeping with his own son, which makes them the complete opposite of the relationship between Riki and his father).

With every Niô figurehead out of the way, the stage is set for the confrontation between father and son. Riki discovers that his father is working with Yasha leader Nôma, selling government secrets to North Korea.The two men in turn find out that Riki is behind the spate of assassinations and Nôma orders Fudô to kill his youngest son too. A flashback to the murder of Ryû shows he has no qualms about doing so: instead of decapitating his son with a single clean cut, he hacked into the young man's neck again and again, almost with relish. (This detail was not shown during the murder scene at the start of the film, which cut away before the sword hit its target. Adding the additional detail at this point in the shape of a flashback emphasises Fudô's ability to also kill his other son, information that would have been unnecessary in the earlier version of the scene. The flashback furthermore reveals how Riki used his brother's blood to tattoo his own back.)


Riki's tattoo, made with his brother's blood.

Riki sends two of his infant assassins to kill Nôma, but their bullets are stopped by the gangster's bodyguard and the two little boys end up in pieces in a garbage bag (Miike simply cuts from Nôma smiling at the boys to a garbage man finding the bags – a child's hand falling out of a bag is the only explicit reference to their deaths).These are the first casualties within Riki's group and, characteristically, they are the start of its downfall. To carry out Nôma's order, Iwao Fudô calls upon his illegitimate son Gondo, whom he fathered with a woman on one of his spy trips to North Korea. A former commando in the North Korean army, Gondo now runs a squalid Korean diner in Hakata, but takes great pride in his roots.

(His affection for Korean cuisine leads Gondo to storm the kitchen of a Korean restaurant and molest the cook after tasting the establishment's "Japanese marinated" kimchi – a reference to *Shinjuku* Outlaw's kitchen joke as well as that film's link between food and nationality through the Peruvian-Japanese character of Tsujii.)

Gondo invades Riki's high school, passing himself off as the new gym teacher. At that same time, Aizome's motorbike mysteriously explodes with him on it. Toko unmasks Gondo, but he throws her to her death out of a window. Soon thereafter, Mika is covered in acid during her strip act. Riki's group is decimated in a matter of days, but the young man finds a new ally in miss Miroku (Marie Jinno), the replacement English teacher who joined the school several days before Gondo's appearance. Miss Miroku is in actual fact Ryû Fudô's former girlfriend Junko, daughter of the leader of the Ashura yakuza group, one of the Yasha's mainland rivals.

After hearing from a hospitalised Mika that Gondo was behind the attacks, Riki goes for revenge and looks up the killer in his rundown apartment (an orange moon shines like on the night Ryû was killed, indicating that this is another family struggle). There he finds a photograph of a young Gondo in the arms of Iwao Fudô and an unknown woman, and he realises that his opponent is his half-brother.Then Gondo arrives home and the fight between the two begins.

The discovery of the photograph is of crucial importance to this scene, since it makes Riki realise he has to kill his own brother. This is a new development for him, since every struggle in his life has been between generations: between the young and a father figure. What this introduces is fratricide – he is not about to kill a generational opposite, but an equal. To Riki this is like killing Ryû himself and his hesitations cause him to fail in battle. He is trounced by Gondo and only survives through the intervention of Junko, who shoots his half-brother in the head with a sniper's rifle. (Gondo's skills as a trained commando give a superficial validity to his defeat of Riki, but it's the young man's doubts about killing his own brother that nearly do him in.)

Standing by Junko's side is Aizome, who has survived the explosion of his bike thanks to an assortment of metal prostheses that now cover half his body. This image of a man caught between human and mechanic states would return in *Full Metal Gokudô* the following year and could be considered a rough example of Miike's theme of physiological rootlessness. A better example is found elsewhere in *Fudoh* in the shape of Mika, who in a sex scene with Junko is revealed to be a hermaphrodite. Mika lives as a woman but her outward presentation of female sexuality (her job as a stripper, an earlier sex scene with Riki) is merely a way to sublimate her insecurity about herself. When she makes love to Junko, she lets her masculine side dominate and takes the male role.

Hearing of Gondo'sdeath, Iwao Fudô attempts to kill Riki himself.Sneaking into his room at night, he strikes with his sword like he did ten years earlier with his other son. Riki is prepared for the attack: a metal ring around his neck deflects the blade. He gets up and grabs his father's sword, but Iwao pulls out a gun and fires it at Riki, who is thrown back against the wall at the force of the bullets' impact. In another parallel to the murder of Ryû, Fudô continues pulling the trigger even after the chamber is empty. Again Riki gets back on his feet, revealing that he was wearing a bulletproof vest under his kimono. After he declares that "the time that a child sacrificed himself for an elder is past", he cuts off his fathers head with a single cut of the sword.

The denouement sees Nôma pay an unexpected visit to Iwao Fudô's funeral. Riki allows him to pass, but tells him that he will be the first to die when Riki's group comes to the mainland. The film then finishes with an open ending: Nôma pulls out a hidden gun and in reply Riki unsheathes his sword, before the screen goes black and the credits roll..

Although it could be argued that this open ending functions only to set up the possibility of a sequel (which indeed followed a year later, directed by Yoshiho Fukuoka), it actually fits in with the narrative. The Yasha-Niô relationship is not central to the story, not in its initial rivalry, not in its second form of collaboration and not in Riki's intention to expand his activities to the mainland. Similar to the confrontation between the protagonists in *Kenka No Hanamichi*, the presence of the Niô group functions as a MacGuffin, what truly matters is Riki's desire to kill his father. Beyond that there is no story, also not for a sequel. One could write a story about the struggle between Riki and Nôma, but it would be a story without motivation. The motivation for the character of Riki is to avenge his brother and kill his father, and he achieves it in this film. There is no drive for the character beyond that (which the two sequels seem to confirm, since they only feature Riki and Nôma in small supporting roles, predictably with little success). The story consisted of his attempt to kill his father, tying up the subplot concerning Nôma is of no consequence and would most likely end as an anti-climax.

The handful of implausibilities that can be found in the plot have no resonance on audience involvement for the same reason, It's never questioned why Riki doesn't appear to have a mother, for instance, since this is wholly irrelevant. One could poke holes into the plot if one was so inclined, but this would be ignoring the film's cinematic qualities. Fudoh succeeds very well at fusing form and content, and its merits in this regard become all the more clear when we compare the film to the much weaker works Miike turned out the same year like the *Shin Daisan No Gokudô* films and *Peanuts.* These were films in which the stylistic elements were almost non-existent, making their inconsistencies and implausibilities on a plot level all the more blatant.

Not so in Fudoh, which succeeds so well at fusing form and content that one of the director's main themes -the contrast between the child and violence - no longer functions as a theme but becomes part of the style: here the contrast doesn't serve to increase the impact of violence, but to emphasise the tone of exaggeration.The symbiosis between form and content has allowed it to be raised from the level of the latter to that of the former.

Fudoh was the first of Takashi Miike's films to play to foreign audiences. In early 1997 it played the Brussels Fantastic Film Festival in Belgium, followed that same year by screenings in Canada at the FantAsia festival in Montreal and the Toronto International Film Festival. As a result of the Toronto screening, American weekly news magazine Time named the movie that was originally intended for the Japanese video market one of its ten best films of the year[6].

JINGI NAKI YABÔ 2

1997

Miike passed on the opportunity to direct sequels to Peanuts, *Kenka No Hanamichi* and *Fudoh.* Perhaps due to the results of the *Daisan* No *Gokudô* follow-ups, the director rarely made another sequel that continued from a previous film. Most of the sequels he did direct, like the *Dead* or *Alive* trilogy for instance, are related to their predecessors in name only and usually feature completely different storylines and characters.

This *goes* for *Jingi Naki Yabô* 2 as well. Despite reuniting Miike with actor/producer Harumi Sone and main actors Hideki Sone and Kôjirô Shimizu, the film's plot bears no relation to its precursor. It's not a true sequel in the strictest sense of the word, but thematically the two films are most definitely connected. The film reprises the emphasis on father-son relationships of the first, but instead of focusing on the generation gap it makes the family bond its central theme. Blood is thicker than water and family ties are stronger than any yakuza affiliation.

In contrasting these two elements, the themes of loyalty and honour inevitably come into play, embodied by its main character Tetsuya (Hideki Sone) who is put in the position of having to choose between yakuza and family'. Whereas the Tetsuya character of the first film was taught about honour through an elder, who symbolically passed it on to the younger

Stills of *Jingi Naki Yabô 2* © 1997 Toei Video Co., Ltd.

Kojirô Shimizu (l.) and Hideki Sone face to face for the second time.

generation, here hefullyembodiestheconceptfrom the start. For those familiar with theyakuza genre it's no surprise that *Jingi Naki Yabô* 2 ends in the tradition of the *ninkyô eiga*[8] of the 1960s, with a finale that sees Tetsuya taking on an entire yakuza gang armed only with a sword.

As an embodiment of honour, Sone portrays a character who is wiser, calmer and more mature than his namesake from the previous film. Here Tetsuya is the adopted son of yakuza family Iwasaki, who left home as a teenager in a conscious decision not to follow in his father's criminal footsteps. He went to Osaka where he eventually gave up on his principles and joined the Mogami group.

Tetsuya finds his friend Yuji (Kyôsuka Yabe) dying in a ditch.

When his adopted father Iwasaki is stabbed in the streets and admitted to intensive care, Tetsuya returns home for the first time in years, bringing his Mogami underling Yuji (Kyôsuke Yabe) with him. Iwasaki (Harumi Sone, who here gets stabbed in a Miike film for the fourth time) is under the care of doctor Koike, the fiance of Tetsuya's sister Yôko. The culprit was a young Iranian who is himself found dead several days later, making the rival Yamane yakuza group the main suspects.

The Yamane blackmail Koike into killing Iwasaki by injecting him with poison, after which the doctor too is found dead. His death is made to look like an accident and police dredge up his car from the harbour, finding Koike's body behind the wheel with an empty bottle of sake. Both Yôko and Tetsuya know the doctor didn't drink alcohol, putting the two

Left: Kitahara drowns his sorrows at his girlfriend's bar.
Right: Tetsuya receives his father's service pistol and prepares for the final battle.

deaths into dubious light. Torn between his loyalty to the Mogami group and his desire to avenge the deaths of his father and his brother-in-law, he considers quitting the Osaka unit. Iwasaki's brother Kishimoto prevents him from doing so and instead enters the rival headquarters on his own with a lit stick of dynamite, blowing up the Yamane leader and himself.

But Kishimoto's act doesn't solve the problem. The second-in-command of the villainous clan is still alive, while Kishimoto's replacement Hase is too weak to lead the Iwasaki group. From there the film builds up to the inevitable confrontation between Tetsuya and the Yamane, piling on the motivations for the young man to go into battle: Hase sells out the Iwasaki group to Yamane and tries to get Tetsuya to join them, but the young man refuses. When his mother tells him that Kishimoto was his natural father, Tetsuya resigns from the Mogami group to avoid involving them in his personal vendetta. Then his friend Yuji is murdered while spying on the Mogami group and Tetsuya finds a new ally in policeman Kitahara (Kôjirô Shimizu), whose investigations into the Yamane have resulted in his girlfriend and her infant son getting killed by the bullets that were meant for him, and a smear campaign branding him as a corrupt cop all over the media. When he reveals himself to be Iwasaki's estranged son, the two men declare war on the Yamane together.

The sudden revelation that Kitahara is Iwasaki's son is symptomatic for the contrived build-up to the film's finale. It's also completely unnecessary for the character, who was already given more than enough motivation to get back at the Yamane group through the deaths of his loved ones and the false accusations of corruption. Such contrivances are not the only things bothering the film. The Yamane are never more than two-dimensional villains. In an attempt to create at least some dimension, Miike adds a number of peculiar touches to the character of the group's leader (Hirotarô Honda), dressing him in very uncharacteristic round glasses and a bright red scarf and giving him an obsession for his pet tortoise. The sidestep Miike takes with Yamane's second-in-command is somewhat more substantial. In the backroom of a hostess club he rapes one of the bargirls, but what starts as a generic

rape scene becomes a debunking of the image of the male aggressor when the gangster achieves orgasm after only three thrusts and a mere five seconds.This image of failed masculinity is something Miike would employ more overtly in *Full Metal Gokudô*, *Dead or Alive* and Visitor Q.

These touches may make the characters slightly different from the run-of the-mill gangster, but aren't enough to remedy the problems. The villains serve as an excuse to further the plot, rather than being part of it. They exist to emphasise Tetsuya's sense of honour and give him an excuse to go into battle. But their perfunctory evildoing and the increasing number of murdered relatives only weaken the impact of Tetsuya's moral choice between family and yakuza affiliation. It never for a moment feels like the harrowing decision it should be.

Jingi Naki Yabô 2 embraces the tradition of the *ninkyô eiga* even more wholeheartedly than its predecessor, not only in characterisation, the moral conflict and the one-for-all finale, but also in Miike's consistent use of anachronisms. Although the story is set in the 1990s, several scenes and props echo the early twentieth-century setting of most of the *ninkyô eiga*. Tetsuya travels to and from Osaka on an old steam train and carries his fathers World War 2 service pistol with him into battle. Several scenes are set in a deserted countryside devoid of all signs of modernity and on a wooden bridge that seems ages old (which additionally functions as the symbol for Tetsuya's farewell to his family).

On occasion, Miike makes interesting use of the camera. A three-minute dialogue scene between Tetsuya and Kishimoto is shot in a single take with a fixed camera, with the background activities of Yuji providing depth of field (Miike made similarly effective use of background action in a scene in *Shinjuku Triad* Society). The impact of a police raid on the iwasaki household is effectively shown by filming it subjectively. Again shot in a single long take, we watch from Kitahara's point of view as he makes his way into the house and up the stairs, occasionally glancing into rooms to survey the chaos. But aside from these two moments in which the camera is very consciously and effectively employed, Keijirô Miyanishi's cinematography is a step down from Hideo Yamamoto's work on *Kenka No Hanamichi* and *Fudoh,* particularly in the overlighting so typical of Miike's early video work.

Jingi Naki Yabô 2 was a momentary lapse in the upward trajectory started by *Kenka No Hanamichi.* The films that followed it, however, would more than make up for its weaknesses.

KISHIWADA SHÔNEN GURENTAI – CHIKEMURI JUNJÔ HEN

1997

To this day *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Chikemuri Junjô Hen* [lit: Boy hooligans from Kishiwada – blood soaked purity episode] remains a unique entry in Takashi Miike's body of work. It's the only time he ever agreed to make a sequel to another director's film. Knowing Miike's, dislike of sequels, it's even more exceptional that one year later he would also direct a second follow-up to Kazuyuki Izutsu's 1996 original.

The reason for Miike's uncharacteristic decision is not difficult to guess: with its mid-1970s Osaka setting and high school graduate protagonists, *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* had all the ingredients for a continuation of *Kenka No Hanamichi's* theme of nostalgia. Indeed, the result is not so much a sequel to Izutsu's film as an extension of Miike's own work. Set in the period directly following high school graduation, *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Chikemuri Junjô Hen* continues the use of fighting as a symbol for childhood, or in this case for immaturity. Fighting here becomes not simply a way to relive the past, but a conscious choice to not grow up.

The presence of Kenka No Hanamichi's lead actors Kyôsuke Yabe and Yasushi Kitamura creates another link between the two films, although neither plays a leading role here. The two portray friend and nemesis respectively to protagonist Riichi (Kôji Chihara), a teenager from the working class district of Kishiwada with a love for violent pranks and a knack for getting into frequent punch-ups.

The *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai* series is based on a string of strongly dramatised autobiographical novels by Riichi Nakaba. The author appears in Miike's film as bar owner and former yakuza Kaoru, a man seemingly invincible in street fights who serves as an idol and role model to Riichi and his friends.This bit of casting indicates a difference in philosophy between Miike and his predecessor. No doubt as a result of his own Osaka background, Miike kept his version closer to the world of the author than Izutsu did. Izutsu, who hails from Nara, named his lead character Kotetsu instead of Riichi and had another actor play the part of Kaoru. Miike's personal attachment to the setting resulted in a detailed, nuanced and passionate approach that is worlds apart from the middling *Jingi Naki Yabô 2*. The presence behind the scenes of Hideo Yamamoto, Masa Nakamura and Yasushi Shimamura (all absent from *Jingi Naki Yabô 2*) is also a good indication of his devotion to the material.

As noted, the film can be seen as a continuation of the themes of *Kenka No Hanamichi*, moving away from high school and portraying the passage into adulthood and the choice between maturity and immaturity. On their last day of school, Riichi, his girlfriend Ryôko (Sarina Suzuki) and his friends Yuji (Yasushi Chihara, the lead actor's brother and partner in a *manzai* comedy duo) and Tetsuo (Kyôsuke Yabe) pull one last prank on a teacher (played by Daisuke Iijima), before tearing up their recently acquired diplomas and embarking on a summer vacation filled with brawls, pranks and vandalism. In the montage that accompanies the opening credits, we see them use baseball bats, knives, metal pipes, bricks and even a harpoon in their uninterrupted reign of terror against their neighbourhood rivals. They take as well as give – Riichi spends much of the summer limping after receiving a knife in the leg from his nemesis Sada (Yasushi Kitamura) – but none of the damage is lethal or lasting.

The violence here is non-violent, like slapstick that's not played for laughs. It's not hurt these characters feel, but joy. Their acts are a celebration of youth, another example of Miike's childhood idyll in which invulnerability is a crucial factor.

But the intensity of it in the opening minutes points to these acts being the last gasp of a childhood about to disappear forever. When winter sets in, so does the realisation that the characters have to make a choice, to decide how they want to live the rest of their lives.

The film is divided into two parts: "Side A: for winter" and "Side B: for summer" (the reference to LP records forms a suitably nostalgic nod to the period). The two seasons are connected to the mental states of the characters, and to maturity and immaturity. The credit sequence makes the link between immaturity and summer, and as the falling cherry blossoms in the opening scene attest, also to spring (Miike would again use cherry blossom as a symbol for youth in *Andromedia*).

As Ryôko gets a job as a shampoo girl in a hair salon, Riichi starts selling slippers from a street stall. He falls in lust with Naomi, a childhood friend who has grown up into a long-legged, miniskirt wearing bargirl. He soon finds his way into her arms and into her bed, but Ryôko sees them together on the streets one night. The way Miike portrays her grief is thoroughly cinematic. During the opening montage he showedtwo brief scenes of Ryôko enjoying herself while taking a bath. After she discovers that her boyfriend is cheating on her, the next shot we see is of Ryôko in a bathroom that's completely dark, save for one shaft of moonlight that shines in through a small window and illuminates the steam rising from the hot water. The darkness and the fact that she's sitting with her back to the camera make it impossible to see her face. However, because the framing is wider than the two previous shots of her in the bath, she comes across as being isolated in this dark, empty space. The place that gave her happiness before is now rendered as cold and gloomy, and this contrast not only expresses the girl's feelings, but also a change in comparison to the earlier situation: for Ryôko, Riichi's deceit constitutes the sudden end of childhood and its innocence.

She breaks up with him in an emotional and heated conversation in a coffee shop, which ends in her emptying a glass of water over him. (The scene is accompanied to good effect by a loud, distorted electric guitar solo courtesy of Tomio Terada – the composer of all of Miike's early V-cinema films showed that he too had developed since those early years.) To mark the end of her childhood she cuts her hair, then visits Yuji to hand him all the photographs she took during high school. She says she doesn't have the strength to burn them herself and asks him to do it for her. Her memories of childhood fill a very symbolic garbage bag that she gives to Yuji. This act completes Ryôko's development from child to adult and thereby the film moves into its second half. "Side B: for summer" marks the end of Ryôko's childhood and the beginning of Riichi's descent into misery.

Instead of burning the pictures, Yuji takes them to Riichi in an attempt to make his friend realise what he has thrown away. Being confronted with the record of his past with Ryôko sends Riichi into a depression, whose depths are emphasised by the opposite trajectory of Yuji, who falls in love with Ryôko's hair salon colleague Masae (played by Hiroko Nakajima from *Eyecatch* Junction, who like composer Terada had made some significant leaps in ability since those early days). There's an ominous undertone to Yuji's happiness, which is established first by Ryôko's concluding voice-over after handing himthephotographs:overaclose-up of the picture of them with their torn-up high school diplomas, she says she hoped she would never meet Riichi again, but instead it was Yuji she would never again see. This is repeated

even more portentously by a later voice-over from Riichi, who while pondering over the same photograph says that Yuji's disappearance made him think about giving up his old ways entirely.

With both voice-overs being delivered in retrospect, it's clear to the viewer that something bad will happen to Yuji. It puts the viewer at an advantage over Yuji himself who at that moment is of course completely unaware of what's to come. This gives Yuji's scenes the aforementioned undertone of dread, but also allows the director to manipulate the audience, since they don't know exactly what it is that will happen to Yuji and when it will happen. Miike makes the most of this in the build-up to Yuji's death scene, which we will come to later.

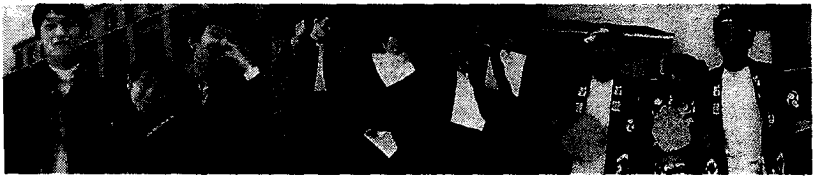
Riichi's voice-over not only foreshadows Yuji's fate but also illustrates his own internal conflict, a conflict that voices the film's central theme. Walking down the street one evening, he sees himself strolling hand in hand with Ryôko, wearing bright summer clothes to contrast his own drab winter coat. Soon after this, he is beaten up on the streets by a gang of young punks. He stumbles into Naomi's house, but when the girl shows a genuine concern over his bleeding wounds he yells at her to leave him alone. After he burns Ryôko's pictures he breaks up with Naomi, leaving another girl behind in tears. The break-up illustrates the dimension to the character of Naomi, who despite being of easier virtue than Ryôko is still portrayed as a human being, rather than a two-dimensional home wrecker.

When he repeatedly slams his fist into a metal post out frustration and self-loathing, Riichi is reminded that the emotional harm he has caused on the people he loves has proven a lot more painful and lasting than any physical damage he did on his numerous enemies. Having forced both Ryôko and Naomi out of his life, Riichi turns to the last person he has left and spends the night at his mother's house. She fixes him dinner before leaving him to go to work. When he asks her how his absent father is doing, she replies: "When you fight, make sure you win." This expression at once hints at the problems in his parents' relationship (which would form the basis for the second sequel) and serves to inspire Riichi to get his act together. When he leaves the house the following day, he confronts the gang that beat him up and pummels them single-handedly, thereby liberating himself from his emotional crisis. While this would seem to indicate that he is ready to move on (also given his earlier burning of Ryôko's photographs), the fact that he regains his confidence through fighting indicates that he is still immature. He hasn't so much developed as regressed, rediscovered his old source of happiness.

Fittingly, he hooks up with his friends Yuji and Tetsuo again. Throughout the film, the emphasis on Riichi and Yuji has pushed the role of Tetsuo into the background. His character is largely without function, but like various other supporting characters he helps to broaden the scope and open the film up, making it more than just the story of Riichi's depression. When he is brought back into the film after Riichi finds his stride, he has bought himself a new car. Tetsuo's own immaturity is evident in his choice, a tuned-up muscle car, and in the fact that he trades it in for a bigger one several days later. It's as a result of his new cars that the three boys reunite. The trio take a ride together but are pushed off the road by a fellow speed demon. They crash into a bulldozer parked by the roadside, but emerge unscathed except for Yuji who has shit his pants (the fact that he finds this as amusing as his friends do, indicates Yuji's own continued immaturity, thus completing the reunification of three immature friends). He takes off his pants to wash himself in the nearby river, but falls into

the water. When Riichi and Tetsuo rush up to help him, he's gone. For a moment it seems as if he has drowned, until he comes up from below the surface with a big smile on his face. As he climbs back onto the shore, there's a rumbling in the clouds overhead and out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning shoots down and hits Yuji, leaving nothing but a charred human figure.

This scene demonstrates the director's ability to take situations beyond their expected and seemingly obvious end. This mining of a source for its full dramatic and stylistic potential is something he would repeat on many another occasion, including the finales of Rainy Dog, Dead or *Alive* and *Dead* or *Alive* 2. This is not a case of pushing the envelope for its own sake or going 'over the top'. It's a careful and deliberate manipulation of audience expectations, which in the case of the car crash scene functions to fit Yuji's death scene in with the tone of the film. By postponing his death, Miike makes the moment as much a piece of blackly comic slapstick as the film's numerous fight scenes. If he had made Yuji die in the crash, his death would have just been shocking. If he had drowned, it would only have been tragic. The completely unexpected lightning bolt makes it absurdly comical, without making it any less tragic or shocking.



Three of Ryôko's snapshots: Riichi and friends, before during and after graduation

But what gives the scene its full potential is the fact that the audience is involved. With their knowledge of Yuji's fate, they expect his death to come in this scene, first in the car crash, then in the river. It's because Miike involved the audience that he can get away with postponing it and bring it to a point where it fits in with the tone of the film. The audience participation makes this much more than simple indulgence.

The scene also displays Miike's ability to create suggestion through editing, something he would more clearly employ in the finale of *Audition* and throughout *Ichi the Killer*. The actual crashing of the car is not shown, neither is Yuji's fall into the water. Sound and the juxtaposition of images (particularly cutting to the direct aftermath of a situation or a detail of it) do the work. The lightning strike is shown (for this unexpected moment to work it needs to be) but when Yuji's charred body falls, Miike cuts to a black screen just before it hits the ground, thus suggesting the impact and its messy results where showing them would have taken the scene too far into absurdity and made it ridiculous.

In the denouement Miike again plays with audience expectation, using virtually the same technique as in the car crash scene. In hospital after the accident, Riichi meets Ryôko again. They leave together but part ways on the streets. As they turn and walk away in opposite directions, it seems as if they have said their final farewell. But after Ryôko rounds a corner, Riichi turns around and runs after her. Now it seems as if they will end up together again

after all, but all Riichi finds is an empty street. Ryôko has disappeared once and for all from his life. Riichi is initially disappointed, but he finds his stride again while he walks away. He starts running and with his fists clenched, he runs straight into battle with his eternal nemesis Sada.

Splitting up is what eventually liberates both Riichi and Ryôko. Riichi realises that being immature is his true calling and he embraces it wholeheartedly. The very fact that he turned around to go after Ryôko is typical of his character. In his immaturity, he thinks everything can be just like it was. Ryôko on the other hand had long since decided that she wanted to move on. That she cut her hair and gave away her collection of photographs were unmistakable indications of the change in her character. She doesn't look back in that final scene, meaning the mature decision is hers. The final shot of her sees her standing on a rooftop, staring after a red balloon floating symbolically upwards to the sky (the same balloon also floated through the frame in the opening shot of the film – in the context of the final day of high school it's equally symbolic of the moment when life needs to move on).

That Riichi should collide with Sada in the end is inevitable. Throughout the film, their interactions have been the directors tool to display Riichi's changing mental state. The credit sequence shows them both eager to fight, and establishes their relationship as well as the tone of the film's violence. When Riichi is infatuated with Naomi, he has no eye for Sada's provocations. When he is in the midst of his depression, he slouches past his rival and ignores him completely. There was only one way to illustrate Riichi's liberation at the end of the film, and that was to have him clash gleefully with Sada. The resulting fight is not important here, which is why Miike (like in the final shot of *Kenka No Hanamichi*) cuts to the closing credits before their fists hit target. What matters is the eagerness that springs forth from the characters immaturity. Like the film's title suggest, therein lies Riichi's purity and Miike is more than happy to allow him to stay pure.

RAINY DOG

Gokudô Kuroshakai – Rainy Dog

1997

Despite the similarities in the films' original titles, Rainy *Dog* is not a sequel to 1995's *Shinjuku Triad Society*. Often referred to as the *Kuroshakai* trilogy, *Shinjuku Triad Society (Shinjuku Kuroshakai), Rainy Dog (Gokudô Kuroshakai)* and *Ley Lines (Nihon Kuroshakai, 1999)* are connected on a thematic level – as most of Miike's films are – but feature different characters and storylines.

Rainy Dog is the odd one out of the three. Whereas the first and third film both focus on zanryu koji and ethnic or cultural rootlessness, Rainy Dog presents a 'stranger in a strange land' scenario, making the protagonist's missing roots geographical in nature. In this respect the film is connected to the Taiwanese scenes in Shinjuku Triad Society, since Rainy Dog's lead character Yuji (Show Aikawa) is a yakuza exiled in one of the more shabby sections of Taipei. Since the film's intent is to show the main character's sense of displacement, Yuji is not a man of mixed cultural background, but a Japanese first and foremost. Indeed, his cultural and ethnic identity needs to be clear for this to work, thus making him an outcast simply from the fact that he is a Japanese person in Taipei.

In this city swept by a series of torrential rainstorms, Yuji works nights at a slaughterhouse transporting pig carcasses and uses his gangster skills to do occasional assassination jobs for the local crime lord. This man, who like many of the characters in the film remains unnamed, saves Yuji's money for him and puts part of his earnings into the manufacture of a fake passport.

The reason for his exile never becomes clear (and indeed is thoroughly unimportant in the context of the film), but it soon turns into a permanent banishment when he receives a phone call from Japan telling him his boss has been killed and that his group has been overrun by rivals. On top of that, his former colleague says he will "take care" of Yuji's girlfriend. Done in a voice-over, Yuji's reaction is to call himself a failed yakuza, "the lowest of the low".

This ostracism from his own group, plus the loss of his girlfriend (not to mention the fact that he has no passport), further amplifies his status as an outcast: his home is denied him and even if he would return to Japan he would find his own world and his old life gone. He doesn't belong where he is now and he no longer belongs in the place where he came from.

Although he speaks Mandarin, Yuji chooses to live in isolation (his rule to never go out into the rain is a symbol for this isolation from society). He clings to the few links to Japan he still possesses, like his habit of watching Japanese monster movies on his computer. This link also exists in the shape of the Japanese man who has been chasing him around Taipei for the last three years. Aside from the fact that he is a fellow Japanese, this pursuer (Tomorowo Taguchi) also remains something of an enigma to the viewer. Sleeping on rooftops in a sleeping bag he carries with him (indicating that he too is an outcast who prefers isolation), he not only goes without a name but it is furthermore never explained what his background is – although he motivates his dogged pursuit by saying that it's his job, which would suggest that he is a policeman. The other possibility is of course that he is a rival gangster not quite in tune with recent developments back home.

Our lack of knowledge about Taguchi's character matters very little, since his function is first and foremost as one of Yuji's precious few links with Japan. Although it is clear that his job is to kill Yuji and that he is only allowed to return to Japan after he has succeeded (thus in turn making Yuji his only link to Japan), the three years the men have known each other as well as their Japanese identities have turned their rapport into an odd love-hate relationship. They only have two scenes together, the first of which illustrates their relationship perfectly. The sequence starts as a pursuit, then becomes a temporary truce during which the two men have dinner together, only to end with Yuji mercilessly beating up his nemesis in an alleyway.

Yuji's links to Japan start to matter all the more because the setbacks keep piling up. The same day the rainstorms start and the bad news from the home front arrives, an ex-girlfriend turns up on his doorstep with a young boy in tow: the result of a one-night stand she and Yuji had many nights ago. She literally pushes the boy, a mute kid called Chen (Jian-Xian He), into his arms and takes off in a taxi, leaving the bewildered Yuji to care for what may or may not be his son.

It must be noted at this point that the story carries more than a few similarities to Luc Besson's Leon / The *Professional,* a film released three years prior to *Rainy* Dogs. A hitman living an isolated life in a foreign country, doing hits for a local crime lord who 'saves' his money for him, forced to care for an orphaned child through circumstance and pursued by a deranged antagonist; these elements form the basis of both Besson's and Miike's film. The execution however is worlds apart.

Yuji doesn't so much take care of the boy as tolerate him in his vicinity. Where he goes Chen follows, trailing several meters behind him like a stubbornly loyal dog. When Yuji has a meeting with his crime boss employer, the boy waits outside the labyrinth of food stalls at the center of which the criminal holds his court. In an interesting parallel of bad parenting, the crime lord calls Yuji "my son" before ordering him to kill a certain Shu who has been "going behind my back".

The lonely hitman goes straight to work and carries out his assignment in a restaurant where Shu is having lunch with his wife and infant child. He shoots the man in the head several times, in front of his family and with Chen watching him from outside in shock.That night, as the rain comes pouring down, Yuji leaves Chen out in the rain while he himself stays in his house. He lets the shivering boy into his house eventually, giving him shelter and a towel, but nothing else. This act is not out of compassion, but is the result of his own loneliness: Yuji remembered a story (which we hear as a voice-over again) about a prisoner who was in jail so long he started to care for a fly. One day the fly left him and he lost his mind. This thought says more about Yuji's feelings towards his environment and his isolation than about his feelings towards the boy. It indicates that he thinks of himself as a prisoner in this foreign land.

Another hit follows soon after, as Yuji is dispatched to kill a man called Ku Chi-Ping who the boss says "has been screwing my best friends daughter" – another clearly untrue excuse, which is accompanied by another equally false declaration of fatherly love for his employee.

Yuji takes the train to Ku's hometown with Chen again in tow. Despite the reproach of the previous night, he continues to ignore the boy. But Chen is undeterred in his loyalty and learns quickly to adapt to his father's lifestyle. When Yuji has located his target, the boy hides before the hitman has even grabbed his gun. Yuji hesitates in completing his task

however and trots off to a nearby brothel whose pimp happens to speak several words of Japanese. Out of the four available prostitutes, he chooses Lily (Xian-Mei Chen).

The way Miike introduces the character of Lily is illustrative for his handling of visual storytelling in this film, which follows on his work in *Fudoh.* When Yuji enters the brothel, there are three prostitutes present, forcing the pimp to fetch Lily himself, shoving her into the room. This scene already indicates that the young woman is something of an outsider, but when Miike next cuts to the inside of a bedroom, the shot is only of a computer on a table next to the door. Then the door opens and Lily enters. The next shot shows Yuji was waiting for her on the bed.

By framing the computer, the director immediately creates a parallel between Lily and Yuji and how they relate to their environment. After all, the computer was one of the hitman's few links to' where he most wanted to be and like Lily's room the interior of his house also consists mainly of a bed and a computer. This link, established between them through visual means, is quickly acknowledged by the characters themselves. When she takes off Yuji's shirt, this reveals his tattooed torso – once a symbol of belonging, it now indicates his status as an outsider, which like his nationality can never be erased.That night after they have had sex (the film cuts straight to this moment, skipping the sex itself), Yuji wakes up to find her sitting in front of her computer and understands that she too dreams of escaping to a different world. (These two moments-the revealing of the tattoo and Lily sitting at the computer – are again purely visual, speaking volumes with hardly a word of dialogue.)

Yuji stays with her all through the following day and night. She tells him that even though she dreams of escaping (the rain that pours down incessantly outside is the symbol for her misery, and she talks of "escaping the rain" rather than escaping the brothel or the city), she's afraid to leave because she fears that the place she chooses to flee to may be just as bad as where she is now (an expression of rootlessness, since it indicates that she doesn't feel at home anywhere). She has her own website on which she describes herself as a beautician who dreams of seeing the world. It's an open invitation to anyone to rescue her from Taipei. She asks Yuji why he's staying with her. When he says he's waiting for the rain to stop, she types the words "a liar" on her keyboard. They both know that they have found someone who shares their fate, a fellow outcast. (This common fate is mirrored in Chen, who while waiting for Yuji in the downpour has found an abandoned puppy between the garbage bags -thus one rainy dog meets another).

When the rain stops the following morning, Yuji leaves, more determined than ever - his stay with Lily has reminded him that doing his job and making money is his only ticket out of Taiwan. Chen gets up and hurries after him, abandoning his newfound friend with hardly a second thought (another indication that he is growing closer to Yuji, since this is exactly the treatment Chen receives from him).Yuji ambushes Ku in an empty market place and kills him and his two men, again firing several needless rounds into him, before realising they were carrying a bag full of money. He takes the cash and heads for the station, but changes his mind and heads back for the brothel. He shows the money to Lily and tells her this is her chance to escape. He will take her away from Taipei, on the condition that she will take care of Chen when they get to their undecided destination.

Ku Chi-Ping's death is quickly discovered by his brother Ku Hung (Ming-Jun Gao), who had been waiting for him to arrive. I-lung puts all his men on alert for the person who a ew days prior had been spying on his brother. Meanwhile Yuji hijacks a car and forces the

driver to bring them to the station. They find Hung and his men waiting for them and narrowly escape their bullets.

The driver drops them off at a litter-strewn beach (continuing the dog analogy, Chen is distracted by the objects he sees on the beach, toying with them for a moment before looking up and following his master again), where they spend the night in a bunker. Lily tries to get closer to Chen by teaching him how to write his name. The attempt at reproach is not successful. Shared fates or not, Yuji is too accustomed to hiding his emotions and keeps his distance, and Chen follows his example, much to Lily's frustration. They've formed a group unit through their common status as outcasts, but their alliance is not an easy one. The unit may resemble a family but isn't.

Meanwhile Hung has been establishing his power by taking control of his brother's operations and aligning with Yuji's employer in Taipei. When the hitman telephones his boss the following morning, he asks for his money and passport. Still calling him his son and telling Yuji he will get him what he asks, his employer betrays him by passing the information on to Hung. But through his words Yuji realises he's been sold out ("You've done so much for this town. Get away safely" sounds awfully like a final farewell). He flees with the woman and the boy, minutes before cars start arriving at the beach, carrying Hung's men.

As they hurry along the beach, Chen spots a scooter buried in the sand and starts digging it up. The others join in and soon they're on their way back to the city on the little moped. In addition to being another instance in which Chen adopts the behaviour of a dog, digging up the scooter is also the first time the three of them act as a unit-before they simply were together, now they work together. The scene also demonstrates how well implausibility can be used to a film's advantage. The discovery of the scooter and their escape on it is not so much implausible as surreally beautiful and functions as a fitting symbol for the characters' unity. It starts off a period of seeming happiness: they have their unity, the money and transportation, and for a while everything seems blissful. In a parallel to the final moments of *Shinjuku Outlaw,* this happiness, particularly when based on money, doesn't last.

They hide out at the house of a friend of Lily's, a gay artist who tells Yuji that "many gays are happy that he's dead". Nevertheless, he too betrays them. After Lily and Yuji wake up from a brief nap, they find him gone. His computer (the presence of which suggests that he and Lily met through the internet, but that his sexuality kept him from being her knight in shining armour) displays Lily's website and the message Hung posted on it: a $500,000 dollar reward for anyone who can give him information on the whereabouts of Yuji, Lily and Chen. Lily sees her friend in the streets outside, waiting for Hung to arrive.

The three run out (into the rain, which is an omen of what's to come).Yuji tells them to split up and head for the station, while he takes care of Hung's men. This decision is equal to the start of the unit's downfall. By splitting up, they allow the group to fall apart and it's no surprise that Hung finds Lily and Chen first. He kills the prostitute and takes Chen with him as a hostage. (The shooting is not shown, instead we hear the sound of two gunshots over an image of the cloudy sky, which indicates how stylistically different *Rainy Dog* is from *Shinjuku Triad Society* and *Fudoh* – restraint is the keyword here, rather than exaggeration.)

Yuji has heard the gunshots and imagines the worst. He heads for the station and sits down, disillusioned. Within moments, Hung arrives with his henchman, holding Chen at gunpoint. Hung is about to shoot when Chen -who hadn't been able to make so much as a peep as he was shoved around by Hung's henchman – cries out with all his might, much to

Hung's surprise.Yuji makes use of the confusion to shoot both Hung and his assistant. Chen runs into his arms and Yuji holds him tight, an embrace that acknowledges that he sees the boy as his own son.

The disintegration of the group has not finished, however. Several gunshots suddenly pierce Yuji's body – it's his old nemesis who finally, after three years of failure, manages to nail Yuji. As the hitman lies dying in the rain, the gunman celebrates his death as a liberation: he tosses away his weapon, takes off his coat and throws away his sleeping bag. He runs off into the distance cheering with joy, holding an umbrella over his already rain-soaked body -with his liberation and imminent return home, the act of using the umbrella is a way to distance himself from his environment and of his own behaviour of the past few years. It's a new beginning celebrated with a return to his old ways.

Only Chen is left, but moments later Hung gets back up. His dead brother's lighter, which he kept in his pocket as a memento, has stopped Yuji's bullet. The use of this cliché immediately brings to mind the similar moment from *Shin Daisan* No *Gokudô II*, a parallel which given the quality of *Rainy Dog* is most unfortunate. But if we follow the scene through to its end, we notice that Hung's resurrection, albeit awkwardly realised, is most certainly validated within the context of not only the scene but of the whole film. It serves neither as an artificial climax (as in *Shin Daisan* No *Gokudô II*) nor as a means to make the character of Hung larger than life. He comes back not for his own sake but for the character of Chen. Seeing the rage in the boy's eyes, Hung tells him that if he wants revenge, he should grow up first, then come back to kill him. With those words he finishes the education Chen underwent during the course of the film, an education which started the moment his mother pushed him into Yuji's arms. Throughout the film, witnessing his hitman father at work, he had been educated in the way of the gun and he learned quickly. After the first hit he witnessed, he drew a pistol on the pavement with a piece of chalk.

Miike here takes his use of the contrast between the innocent child and the destructiveness of violence a step further by letting it influence (and indeed destroy) the child. Being with Yuji sped up Chen's childhood, which effectively ends in the film's final scene: the death of his father and the resurrection of Hung have signed his fate. We can easily imagine how his wish to avenge Yuji and Lily will probably turn this boy into a criminal, who might not even live long enough to carry out his revenge. (In the light of *Rainy Dog's* similarity to *Leon* it is very enlightening to compare this to the scenes in Besson's film in which Jean Reno teaches Natalie Portman to become a sniper, which are played for laughs and a vague coolness factor. The most dramatic thing we might imagine Portman's character growing into is the coolest kid in school.)

The fact that Chen is spared by Hung says a lot about the character of Ku Hung, as Nell as the film's general handling of its characters. Hung's own situation by way of his brother's death makes him understand and acknowledge Chen's feelings. If he had shot the boy, he either would have had to shoot himself next or he would have been a two-dimensional villain, which he certainly is not at any point during the film. His brother wasn't simply tilled, but his face was completely unrecognisable as a result of the four bullets Yuji fired nto his head. During his wake Ku Chi-Ping had to be laid out in a closed coffin. Ku Hung's wish for revenge is at the very least understandable and perhaps even human.

The same way Ku Hung is not a villain, Yuji can also not be called a hero. He is after all a man who systematically mutilates his victims beyond recognition and he has no qualms

to do so under the eyes of the target's family members and his own son. The way he treats, or rather mistreats, Chen is also far from heroic. From his first scene his dubious moral fibre becomes clear. Walking home from his work in the slaughterhouse, he witnesses a stabbing in an alleyway. Though he probably could interfere and save the victim, he just watches him get knifed by two other men and then walks away.

Another example of Miike's attention to the characters is also given early on. After she dumps Chen on him, Yuji's ex-girtfriend speeds off in a cab. If the director had ended the scene here, this character would have been a two-dimensional nuisance, but instead he chooses to show her sitting inside the taxi, deeply upset over what she's just done. With this extra shot, a character who is in only one scene becomes a human being. (Again, compare this to Leon's two-dimensional characters: the good hero, the evil villain and the cute child. The differences are quite a contrast with the clumsy visual references to Besson's film in Shin *Daisan* No *Gokudô II,* only one year earlier.)

The character's dimensions and moods are reflected in the film on a stylistic level, which creates an atmosphere that serves as the breeding ground for the characters' emotions. As much as Yuji tries to shelter from it, the humidity of the nearly incessant rainstorms seems to pervade everything. This is in large part thanks to Yi-Xu Li's cinematography, which not only lovingly captures the rain-soaked rooftops and streets of Taipei, but emphasises greys to suggest eternally cloudy skies. Kôji Endô's sparse slide guitar score (his first of many soundtracks for Miike's films) adds immeasurably to this atmosphere.

Above all though, there is Miike's ability to describe characters in images without wasting words. The film's scant use of dialogue is a sign of how successful ***Rainy Dog*** is as cinema; dialogue simply isn't necessary in many cases. The most obvious example is of course in the character of Chen, who is a mute and is therefore unable to deliver dialogue. At the same time he is virtually ignored by all other characters, depriving us of a third party to voice his thoughts. Yet he is very well defined character who goes through an entire process in the course of the film, a process that is recognisable and understandable for the viewer. Other examples are the introduction of Lily and the establishment of her connection with Yuji – already outlined above – and the discovery of the betrayal by Lily's friend.

Miike also puts a lot of meaning in objects and symbols, including Yuji's tattoo, the umbrella of his victorious nemesis and the way Yuji handles his sunglasses. Far from superficial attempts at making the character come across as cool for its own sake, Yuji's shades function as an extension of his personality. Yuji is a character with an inner life and an outer life, which function in different ways. His outer life employs tricks to shield off his inner life (which the viewer gets to know at first through his voice-overs). His sunglasses are one of those tricks. With them, he is more mechanical. By hiding his eyes, they literally shield off his emotions from others. Without them he is more human, which happens when he is alone or in moments when emotions are more important than the need to hide them: his dinner with his Japanese nemesis, his stay with Lily and most of all his final embrace with Chen, during which he takes them off after having worn them in the confrontation with Hung. When he is shot, he dies with his shades off.

Show Aikawa's performance as Yuji also deserves mention in this context. ***Rainy Dog*** was the first of many collaborations with Miike for the man whose status as the top star in V-cinema gangster films is rivalled only by Riki Takeuchi. But where Aikawa has a big advantage over Takeuchi is in his ability to portray multi-dimensional characters (which probably

explains why Aikawa, Unlike Takeuchi, also works extensively outside V-cinema for directors like Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Shôhei Imamura). His portrayal of Yuji is spot on, capturing both the mechanical side and the human side of the character. When his ex-girffriend enters his house by breaking open his front door, Yuji at first believes he is under attack. In Aikawa's eyes we can read the characters fear, even though he is holding a gun at the same time. It makes us realise what must be going on beneath those shades.

Rainy Dog's theme of geographical rootlessness-or the stranger in a strange land – would be further expanded by the director in The *Bird People in China* (1998) and *The Guys from Paradise* (2001). With each film the cultural and ethnic identityofthe leadcharacters would come to play a bigger role, resulting in increasing interaction between the environment and the character.

FULL METAL GOKUDÔ

1997

We've seen previously that Miike makes frequent use of juxtaposition as a stylistic device. Usually he applies it to two events happening simultaneously or consecutively, as in *Shinjuku Triad* Society, *Peanuts* and *Kenka No Hanamichi.* In *Full Metal Gokudô,* the film's entire structure is based on the juxtaposition of events, simultaneous but also between different moments in time. With its protagonist a physiologically rootless character who moves from one physical state into another, juxtaposition is the ideal technique to link those two states, contrasting the times at which they occurred.

Taking a very obvious cue from the premise of Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* – but making its central character a gangster instead of a police officer – *Full Metal Gokudô* concerns a man resurrected as a robotic being, but with the memory and consciousness of his past life intact. Here though, it's not just a matter of confusion over being in a new state, but how that state relates to the character's previous persona, a relation that emphasises the aspect of rootlessness.

Protagonist Keisuke Hagane (Tsuyoshi Ujiki) is a failed yakuza (echoes of Rainy Dog's Yuji), a man totally unsuitable for his line of work, as established with a succession of situations that includes him being chased by a victim's knife-wielding wife and breaking down in tears just before having to assassinate a rival. He makes such an unlikely gangster that a group of kids don't believe him when he tells them he is a yakuza, beat him up and steal his money. The only thing that keeps Keisuke in position is the favour of his boss Tosa (Takeshi Caesar). As a trainee gangster washing his boss' floorboards, he used to spy on Tosa in admiration of his strength (this is the film's first juxtaposition, contrasting the peeping tom trainee on his knees with the tattooed, robust, sword-wielding leader). When Tosa found out about Keisuke's admiration, he entrusted him his wallet as he went off to kill the members of a rival group, an act for which the boss ended up in prison for seven years.

This battle is juxtaposed with the scenes that establish Keisuke's character. Unwaveringly, Tosa takes on a dozen opponents armed only with a sword (Miike thus turns a genre cliche into a stylistic device). Keisuke on the other hand is not only a failure as a yakuza, but a failure as a man. *Rainy* Dog's Yuji called himself "the lowest of the low", but Keisuke ranks even lower. Having picked up a call girl, he is unable to ignite any spark, in himself or in the woman, as a result of his small penis size. He vents his frustration by hitting her, but the girl hits him back even harder before throwing him out.

The sex scene started with a close-up of the beginnings of a tattoo on Keisuke's back. Depicting the head of a dragon, it's identical to a detail of Tosa's tattoo, which establishes his continued loyalty and admiration while his boss is in jail. When Tosa is released, Keisuke is there to return him the wallet he guarded for seven years and to drive him to his country home. Tosa's own admiration for his subordinate's loyalty is established when after arriving they are attacked by two assassins: instead of Keisuke catching the bullets meant for his boss, it's Tosa who jumps in front of his underling, which results in both of them getting killed.

Up to this point, the story hasn't deviated much from the mould of the yakuza genre. However, *Full Metal Gokudô* is Miike's most overtly post-modern film since *Naniwa Yûkyôden*

and it mixes elements from a variety of sources. A film so obviously based on the premise of another film can only be overt about its sources. The Frankenstein inspiration already present in *Robocop* is also apparent here, in the shape of scientist / creator Genpaku Hiraga (Tomorowo Taguchi), who calls himself a genius inventor, but says that others think of him as a "mad scientist". This knowing wink is characteristic of the comedic tone the film takes during the sequence of Keisuke's resurrection. Often bordering on silly, the comedy arises from the situation itself, as an acknowledgement of the silliness of the premise (this is a film about a dead gangster who has his head screwed onto a robot body), as well from a very pragmatic, unglamourised depiction of the character's plight. The latter point is illustrated well by the sequence depicting Keisuke's first discovery of his new powers. After his death, he reawakens in a laboratory. His confusion turns into panic when he discovers the size of his penis has greatly enlarged (he is scared not by his resurrection but by manliness). He flees on a bicycle, but treads the pedals so fast he shoots through the streets at super speed. He crashes into a car and is sent flying, landing at the feet of the same delinquents that robbed him before. They try to mug him again, but are easily vanquished by Keisuke. They break their legs when they kick him and when one of them hits him over the head with an iron bar, it folds itself neatly around Keisuke's skull instead of hurting him. Wandering off, Keisuke sees his former underling Junji (Kôji Tsukamoto) picking up the same call girl he failed to get off with himself. The couple enter a hotel but with his super hearing Keisuke can overhear them from outside as they laugh about the size of Keisuke's member. When it starts to rain, he short-circuits and loses consciousness while trying to shelter inside a phone booth. (This sequence works as an antithesis to the segment earlier in the film, which established Keisuke as a weakling. Since it doesn't follow the earlier sequence sequentially we technically can't call it juxtaposition, but the principle is the same.)

Keisuke is brought back to the lab by Hiraga. At this point in the film, the audience is on an equal level of knowledge with the protagonist, creating the need for exposition on who Hiraga is, how he came to create this robot gangster and what the creature's exact abilities are. The result is essentially twelve minutes of Taguchi talking to a disembodied head. Such lengthy expositional dialogue is normally a sign of bad filmmaking, the result of a director not being able to express visually what is said in words. We've seen with for instance *Fudoh* and Rainy Dog that Miike is most definitely able to tell a story by purely visual means, but while he also uses visual exposition in this scene, on the whole it's a step down from a cinematic point of view.

The scene's saving grace is Taguchi's performance. Dressed in a bright yellow coat over an ill-fitting, skin-tight rubber cat suit, the actor turns the scene into a showcase, which despite resembling a one-man show thankfully never gives way to overacting. The way he plays the character is also referential to his own role of Wang in *Shinjuku Triad Society*, a connection most clearly felt when he pulls out Keisuke's mechanic eyeball and when he exposes himself in the film's final shot. Taguchi's performance makes the scene a lot less wearisome than it might have been.

The scene is crucial however, since beyond delivering exposition it also functions to establish Keisuke's rootlessness. As noted, this rootlessness is not simply the result of him discovering himself inside a new body, but of finding out that parts of this body are Tosa's. Now possessing the limbs, penis, tattoo and heart of his boss, his wish to emulate his master has come true. His weakness and failure have vanished, replaced by a multitude of

masculinity symbols: the size of Tosa's member, Keisuke's newfound supernatural strength, the look of the robot which replicates and magnifies masculine build and muscle texture, plus the fact that experiencing strong emotions will cause his circuits to malfunction (a very perceptive touch, since he is basically taught not to show emotions).

However, while his masculinity is assured (established by Keisuke passing his creator's final field test), having Tosa's body also recalls the memory of the assassination. He now lives with the heart of the man he admired most but failed to protect. He is masterless, plagued by feelings of guilt and harbouring a wish to avenge Tosa, which gives him the status of a rônin, a masterless samurai. It's an apt parallel, since the *rônin* is essentially also a rootless individual.

Miike's use of juxtaposition finds it apogee in Keisuke's revenge on the murderers of his boss. In one scene, he engages a group of yakuza on the streets armed with a sword, exactly as Tosa did before. His movements and the choreography of the action follow those of the earlier scene very closely, and Miike emphasises it by intercutting the battle with flashbacks to Tosa's, thus creating the juxtaposition between the actions of master and servant.

The trail eventually leads back to Tosa's own gang, who conspired with their rivals to get rid of him in order to pave the way for a merger of the two yakuza groups. Eliminating useless yakuza Keisuke at the same time was killing two birds with one stone. Keisuke goes on a killing spree against his own former gang, but is stopped from harming the leader by his old friend Taka (Yasushi Kitamura). Taka was inducted into the gang simultaneously with Keisuke and from the moment they washed Tosa's floorboards together until Keisuke's death the two had held equal rank. Despite holding a gun to his head, Taka lets his friend go freely, after which Keisuke flees to a secluded beach near Tosa's grave. There he meets his boss' girlfriend Yukari (Shôko Nakahara). He tells her the truth about her lover's death and shows her the tattoo on his back. She leaves him the following morning to take revenge on Tosa's boss, but her attempt is thwarted by the yakuza, who capture her, chain her up at their headquarters and rape her.

On several occasions in the past, Miike managed to turn the obligatory rape scenes that are typical of V-cinema yakuza films on their heads. He does no such thing here. Despite this being a film about failed masculinity, he leaves the opportunity he employed in *Jingi Naki Yabô 2* unused. However, the rape sequence is not without narrative function, as it illustrates Taka's breakwith his pastandwith hisfriendshipwith Keisuke. Taka is initially repelled by his boss' treatment of Yukari but eventually joins in and rapes her too. This decision comes after he has carried out a bombing on Keisuke's seaside hideout. When his men examamine the rubble and find Keisuke's eye, they believe him to be dead. With his friend out of his life, Taka fully becomes a servant of his boss, hence his decision to rape Yukari. Taka's

Fmm **left** to right:
Tosa catches the bullets to protect Keisuke.
Keisuke at the mercy of a gang of street punks.
Electric warrior: Keisuke discovers his newfound powers.
The sight of masculinity.
The creature...
...and its creator (Tomorowo Taguchi).

betrayal is juxtaposed with Junji's increasing loyalty to Keisuke. Having come to the beach to tell him of Yukari's capture, Junji was also a target of the bomb.

Keisuke's eye is brought back to the yakuza leader as proof of his demise, but both Keisuke and Junji had escaped the explosion on time. Through his detached eye he witnesses Taka violating Yukari and her subsequent suicide (she bites off her tongue during the rape). Keisuke attacks the yakuza headquarters, his circuits overheating as a result of his rage over Yukari's death and Taka's treachery. The result is a finale in the *ninkyô eiga* tradition, but for once the odds of one person taking on an entire gang are palatable.

With its combination of traditional yakuza plot and science fiction elements, *Full Metal Go/cudô* veers rather strongly in tone between very silly and dead serious. What holds the film together from a dramatic point of view is the character of Keisuke, whose rootlessness and motivations areverystronglydefined and whose development iscontrasted (in other words juxtaposed) with Taka's descent into evil. This opposite, mirrored development between protagonist and antagonist Miike would again employ in *Dead* or *Alive,* which continues *Full Metal Gokudô's* juxtaposition-based structure.

THE BIRD PEOPLE IN CHINA

Chûgoku No Chôjin

1998

Continuing on themes from the previous year's *Rainy* Dog, *The Bird People* in China again deals with the premise of a stranger in a strange land. Rather than simply repeating the subject, Miike here elaborates on his previous work; whereas the contrast between cultures served as the basis for a character study in the 1997 film, here he employs it as a means to comment on aspects of his own society, as represented by two people: a young, upwardly mobile *salaryman* and a yakuza.

Our protagonist is Wada (Masahiro Motoki), whose down-to-earth, unimaginative persona is established by his opening voice-over: "In my life I must have dreamed ten thousand dreams. But I never once dreamed I was flying." Wada is sitting on a train somewhere in China, sent by his manager to replace a sick colleague in charge of the search for a remote jade mine. The decision to send him was taken only days before and has left Wada with little time to prepare for his trip. Speaking into his tape recorder he professes he doesn't know the first thing about jade. A fast motion sequence condenses the events of the last few days into several seconds, starting with the call from his boss, through his hasty preparations, departure, arrival in China, and back to Wada on the train. This sequence further establishes the young businessman'spersonality: working out in the gym, immaculately dressed and coiffed, and with a beautiful girlfriend, he is the prototype of superficial urban success. To further illustrate how accustomed he is to luxury, he professes to the tape recorder his concern about the calories in the Chinese food – it's not illness or diarrhoea that trouble him, but the risk of getting fat.

His soliloquy in Japanese is overheard by two Chinese passengers, who welcome him with smiles, handshakes and Japanese music played over a big ghettoblaster. As a fourth passenger takes a picture of the trio, Wada reacts frightened and confused, and unsuccessfully tries to get rid of them (for which he uses English).

At the station Wada is welcomed by his guide, a Japanese-speaking Chinese man called Shen. (The casting of Mako in this part is an inspired choice. Since the actor spent most of his life in the US[10], he has a comparable distance to Japanese language and culture as his character.) Shen will take him to the jade deposit, which is in such a remote part of the country that people there "have never heard of Mao Tse-Tung."

Just as they are about to take off in their van, they are stopped by Ujiie (Renji Ishibashi) – a yakuza who has been following Wada since his arrival on Chinese soil (in fact, he was the man who took Wada's picture on the train). Here again, Miike establishes a character through a single act/on: Ujiie invites himself, sits down in the back of the van and orders Wada to shut the door. Again confused, the young man protests and demands to know what's going on. Ujiie drags him out of the van and into a neighbouring building, where he first beats him up and then tells Wada that his sick colleague had tried to scam the yakuza on the deal they'd made about sharing the profits of the jade. Ujiie was sent to China to set things straight – not entirely of his own free will, which creates a link between the two men cemented by the fact that both their respective bosses told them how lucky they were to get

Left: Men on a mission (l. to r.): salaryman Wada (Masahiro Motoki), gangster Ujiie (Renji Ishibashi) and their guide Shen (Mako).
Right: The winged children of Yunnan.

to savour so much delicious Chinese food. (This whole sequence, lasting just over three minutes, is shot in a single take with a fixed camera, before cutting to each man's flashback of his boss extolling the virtues of Chinese cuisine).

The relationship between the men established, the journey commences which will take them further and further away from civilisation. For these two Tokyo urbanites the bumps in the unpaved road are already too much to bear (the camera is placed inside the car during this entire sequence, in order to put the viewer in their shoes), more so when their van starts to fall apart piece by piece. First the door falls off, then the steering wheel comes loose, before it finally gives up the ghost in the next town and they have to continue into the countryside on a tractor. (The van's deterioration becomes a subtle parallel to the mental state of the two men by the fact that it's a Japanese car-the further away from civilisation the Japanese venture, the more they fall apart).

Despite the shared hardships, Ujiie continues bullying Wada, who lets himself be used almost as the gangsters slave. While Ujiie takes a shit outside in the rain, Wada holds up an umbrella for him – the result of his habit of following orders, a fact Ujiie knows very well how to exploit. First a wage slave, now a gangster's slave.

The group is eventually brought to a halt by the discovery that a raging river has inundated the road. Lugging their baggage along with them, they continue on foot into the mountains, only to be hit by a thunderstorm when they reach the top. The storm disperses Wada's papers, which are eaten by goats the following morning. The salaryman is now completely lost: he can no longer do his job or properly report his findings to his manager back home. His pent-up frustration is released when Ujiie bullies him again. Wada fights back, sick of the gangster's treatment, but Ujiie simply pulls out his gun and puts it to Wada's head. Shen rushes in to calm them down. The absurdity of this scene taking place in a remote mountainous region of China is augmented by a procession of passing monks,

each of whom carries a big river turtle. The two men stop their squabble when Shen tells them their transportation has arrived. To Wada and Ujiie's mutual astonishment they continue their journey on a raft pulled upstream by the turtles, and guided by one of the monks as a boatman.

The raft is another in a line of increasingly primitive modes of transportation the men have been using since the beginning of the film. They started on board an aeroplane, then a train, a van, a tractor and finally on foot. This regression toward the most basic mode of travel should end there, since walking is as basic as one can get. However, with the introduction of the raft pulled by turtles, the events portrayed go beyond the primitive and into the realm of the fantastical, signalling a turning point in the film. This change is mirrored in Wada, whose outburst moments earlier proves to be his liberation. instead of continuing his futile fight against the environment, he starts to embrace it, as witnessed by the fact that he wears a monks robe during the trip upstream. Events that follow are in line with this turning point: camping at the riverside that night, the men eat wild mushrooms that turn out to be hallucinogenic. In the festivities that ensue Shen falls and hits his head on a rock, resulting in immediate memory loss that isn't discovered by the others until they're back on the river the next morning. Panic ensues. How are they going to find their way to the jade mine now? With no one to guide them, Wada and Ujiie are forced to start paying attention to their surroundings. Finding some semblance of civilisation becomes a priority, and the thoughts of jade and fortune take a back seat to survival.

From this moment on, the change in the film is complete and this is also reflected on a stylistic level. The pace slows down, and from the first scene after Shen's accident the colour tone changes, as a result of cinematographer Hideo Yamamoto's use of a yellow filter. The filter not only gives the image a slight gold hue to fit with the more fantastical nature of the proceedings, it also accentuates the green of the grass, trees and surrounding hills. In fact, the lustrous green of the landscape becomes uncannily similar to the colour of jade, thus turning the land itself into the treasure while the jade is all but forgotten (thereby revealing the search for jade to be the film's MacGuffin).

Their trip upstream continues without clear direction until they finally encounter other people. Hastening up the hill after them, they find that one of them is an acquaintance of Shen. who takes them to a neighbouring village for dinner. The villagers invite them to stay in their town until their guide regains his memory. The next morning they encounter a group of children adorned with wings made of canvas and wood, wildly flapping their arms in delight as if they believe the wings will indeed carry them up into the sky. The person who teaches them to fly is Yan (Li-Li Wang), a teenage girl with blue eyes who is the granddaughter of a man who supposedly fell from the sky many decades ago. This man turns out to have been a British aviator stationed in India in the early parts of the twentieth century, who crashed in the lake outside the town and continued to live there as one of the villagers. The girl shows them the graves of her grandfather and her parents, on the shore of the lake from which still juts the tail of the downed aeroplane.

Aside from a rumoured ability to fly, the pilot also left his granddaughter with another legacy: a song she sings in garbled English. Wada faintly recognises the melody and sets out to discover the lyrics. He records her voice and devotes himself to unravelling the mystery. Meanwhile, the village's peaceful atmosphere is having a strong effect on Ujiie. who drops his bullying and displays of power in favour of playing with the local children. As he

stands flapping his arms during one of Yan's lessons, its clear that he too has found a form of liberation and has embraced his environment.

After a long period of trying, Wada manages to reconstruct the lyrics to Yan's song (which turns out to be the Scottish folk song ***Annie*** Laurie). In the context of the film however, the lyrics and their discovery have no function. The purpose of Wada's search is not the discovery, but the fact that he takes (and has) the time to do so. What matters is his choice and ability to completely immerse himself in what he might once have considered completely trivial. The slow pace of the second half of the film is therefore completely intentional and is consciously meant as a specific contrast to the fast motion sequence at the start of the film. It's the contrast between Wada's life in Japan and his current situation. The fast motion sequence took all of twenty seconds to tell the events of several days, while the second half of the film spends nearly 20 minutes on Wada's search for the lyrics and Ujiie's games with the children. The latter puts the former info context and shows how what seemed like superficial stylistic bravura is in actual fact an example of form thoroughly entwined with content, much like the changes in the look of the film discussed above.

The changes in Wada may be undeniable, they are not enough to make him a new man. When he teaches Yan the proper lyrics and she sings them to the accompaniment of her friends lute, Wada is touched but at the same time he records their performance. He notices that the batteries are failing, but persists, showing that he is still largely his old self: his main thought is with grabbing a moment, rather than experiencing it.

The enigmatic Yan.

Stills of *The Bird People in China* courtesy of Studio Canal, © 1998 Marubeni Corporation / Hone Films

His quest for the lyrics completed, Wada's mind goes back to his original goals and he takes the piece of jade they discovered near the river to Ujiie with the intent of remounting their search. But the former gangster wants no part of Wada's plan. He has lost all interest in his old life and feels comfortable with his peaceful disposition. His changes have made Ujiie realise that he has been lying to himself for much of his life. His yakuza 'masculinity' has been nothing but a posture, a role he has forced himself to play in order to please others. (This acknowledgement is the complete opposite of Yuji in ***Rainy*** Dog, who laments his exile from his crime unit and calls himself a failed yakuza.)

That night, dressed in the boatman's robe that Wada wore after his own liberation, Ujiie makes his way to the riverbank where the turtles congregate. Staring at them, he is suddenly overcome by a vision of his own death: back in Tokyo, waiting for a stoplight, Ujiie's path is crossed by a band of gangsters who chase him to an empty warehouse and execute him in a protracted shooting. (The scene segues into this vision by way of a simple but effective montage: as he stares at the turtles, a blinking red light hits Ujiie, who looks up to see where it came from. Miike cuts to the blinking traffic light itself to suggest the gangster's point of view, then to back Ujiie as the bars come down and a train zooms past. When the train disappears, the gangster is standing at a railroad crossing in Tokyo, dressed in a suit.)

The next morning Ujiie finds that the villagers and the boatman are frantically looking for the turtles, which have gone missing. Although everyone involved thinks the animals have wandered off on their own, it's clear that Ujiie is behind their disappearance. If the vision told him one thing, it's that his new persona is completely unfit for life as a yakuza and that if he were to return he would either not be accepted or die an early and violent death. Going back is unthinkable.

The turtles are found eventually and put into a bamboo cage to avoid another escape. When this is followed by Shen regaining his memory as a result of another fall, Ujiie feels the threats against him increase. With Shen back in form, Wada can continue his search for the jade vein, then go home with the results and bring civilisation to this remote, unspoilt outpost. Realising this would destroy everything that signifies liberation and happiness for him, Ujiie takes a drastic decision and goes out to kill the turtles (using his old ways to help the new: he dresses in the robe while carrying a gun and a machete). Shen witnesses the slaughter and alerts Wada. They flee to the raft but are captured by the gangster, who holds them and the boatman at gunpoint, declaring his intent to keep the village pure and unspoilt. Wada tells him that it was the airplanes and cars of civilisation that allowed them to travel to the village in the first place, and that the decision is up to the townsfolk, not to them. There is only one way to find out which of the two men is right: to pick up wings and try to fly.

Standing on the mountaintop with their wings on their backs, Wada and Ujiie start flapping their arms, run down the sloping runway and disappear out of frame. All is quiet as the camera stays on the deserted sandy strip. Then the film cuts to a shot of the ledge and a hand covered in scratches and cuts comes into frame. Wada and Ujiie come climbing back up, wounded and bruised, and with their wings broken.

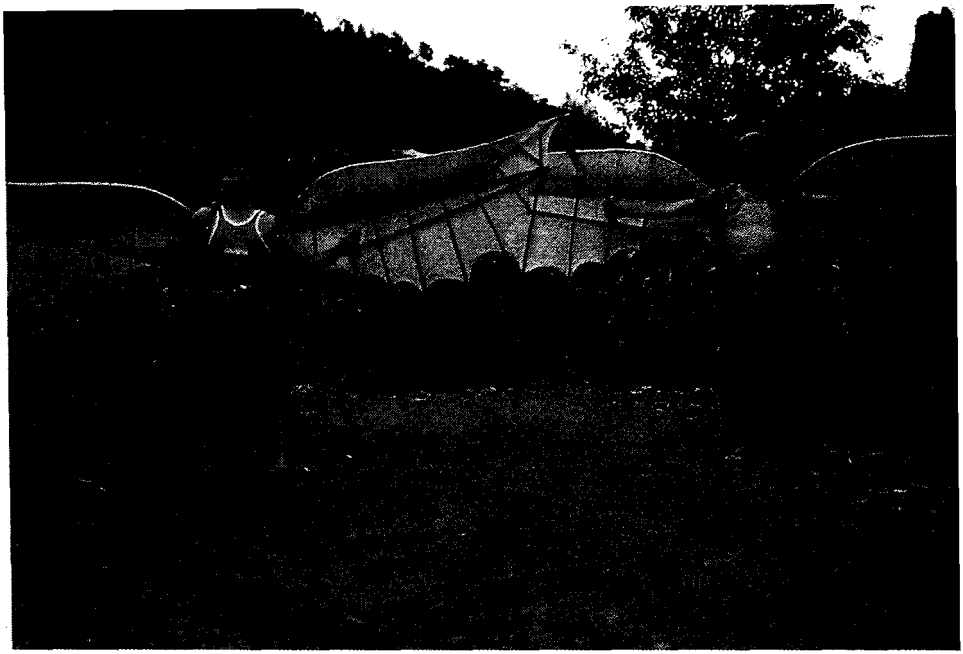
The final proof now delivered, both men return to Japan. Wada goes back to his job, settling back into life's daily grind. In a voice-over he tells us that the tape containing the recording of Yan singing the song was eventually lost in a fire, but that he doesn't care about the material loss. This shows that his experiences have certainly changed him, but he also says that in all the dreams he had after his return from China, he still never dreamed of flying.

Left: **Wada finds the source of the legend.**
Right: **Ujiie discovers his peaceful side.**

(This duality was already signalled at the very start of the film, which briefly showed him on the roof of a building overlooking the city, dressed in his suit and a pair of wings – an image also used on the film's poster.)

Ujiie on the other hand chose to return to the village, saying farewell to his yakuza life and taking the position of mediator between the villagers and Wada's company. He never gave up his belief that the people of the village are indeed able to fly. We see him as an old man (shown from behind, his long grey hairs covering part of his tattooed back), watching winged children run off the mountain. We see their feet lifting slightly off the ground just before they exit the frame. Ujiie then once again picks up wings and makes the same leap. We see his feet lifted off the ground, then a final wide shot of the mountaintop with winged humans circling around it in free flight.

The fact that Ujiie stays behind and indeed learns to fly gives the film a great deal of nuance, since it indicates that The *Bird* People in China is not a film that aims to criticise Japanese society or its people as a whole, but that it goes against the lack of imagination that can be the result of living in that society. The ability to fly is the symbol for the freedom of the imagination and whether or not Ujiie and the children actually do fly is of less importance than the fact that Wada is able to visualise it. Miike does however seem to compromise the validity of some of his arguments by making Ujiie a gangster. Wada as a *salaryman* is a character grounded in real life and representative for a significant section of the Japanese population. The gangster on the other hand is a fantasy character and particularly in the way he is presented here he is a product of cinema rather than of real life. However, the character's main function in the narrative is to influence the protagonist and in that sense what matters most is his behaviour, not his role. But if we were to replace him with Wada's manager or another person in an equally dominant position over the young *salaryman*, this would create the need for additional background detail to make credible how a relationship between two acquaintances could get so distorted that one would treat the other the way



Ujiie treats Wada. In short: in order to avoid superfluous scenes of exposition on the relationship between the protagonists, the two characters need to be strangers and therefore the choice of making Ujiie a bullying yakuza is a very smart one.

The *Bird People* in China changed the perception of Takashi Miike within the Japanese film industry. Still carrying the stigma of a V-cinema yakuza film director, the subject matter of the film, and the circumstances under which it was made, won him a good deal of respect from his industry colleagues. It was furthermore invited to the Vancouver Film Festival, which after showing *Shinjuku Triad* Society the previous year, screened the film alongside *Rainy* Dog and *Blues* Harp in late 1998. *The Bird* People *in China* also directly resulted in him being offered more overtly commercial, higher-budgeted projects like *Andromedia*, which he would take on next.

ANDROMEDIA

1998

With *Andromedia,* Miike made his most unabashedly commercial film yet. Essentially a vehicle for two pop groups -the all-girl quartet Speed and the boy band Da Pump – the film was aimed squarely at the teen and pre-teen youth markets. With this target audience in mind, *Andromedia* provided generic big screen entertainment by combining various crowd-pleasing elements in the shape of romance, comedy, action, stunts and special effects. All this, plus the audience's favourite pop stars, packaged into a tried-and-true formula plot of baddies chasing the goodies for valuable stolen information.

This prompts the question what the appeal of the project may have been for Takashi Miike, aside from the opportunity to work with a clearly higher budget than ever before. The answer lies in the most obvious of places. Pitting a group of teenagers against a villainous corporation, the plot itself is a variation on the contrast between the child and violence. For all its formulaic elements, the story of *Andromedia* offered Miike the chance to'once again explore the theme of childhood and nostalgia so dear to him.

But the results are rather ambiguous: one half an exploration of childhood that follows on the directors earlier work, the other half a formulaic intrigue constructed in almost perfunctory manner. Unfortunately, the two sides rarely complement each other to good effect, playing like two separate entities instead of an integrated whole.

Just before she and her friends are to start the first day at their new high schools, a teenage girl called Mai (Hiroko Shimabukuro) encounters her former classmate Yu (Kenji Harada) on the beach. The two have known each other since childhood and have always been on the verge of falling in love. This particular afternoon, sitting in the shade of the cherry tree where they used to play as children, they finally do.

Mai's father, doctor Hitomi (Tsunehiko Watase), is a scientist researching artificial intelligence. Since the death of his wife he has been preoccupied with the possibility of recording a person's memories and storing it as data. Mai served as the model for a virtual entity he built inside his computer, into which the recorded memory can be uploaded to create a complete virtual copy of a human being.

His invention was originally intended for an American company called Digital Ware, but Hitomi abandoned them when he found out that his employer, a megalomaniac former whiz kid called Zacker (cinematographer Christopher Doyle in shorts and sneakers), wanted to use it to upload his own mind into a virtual copy of himself. Zacker is still after Hitomi's invention and dispatches his nefarious Japanese henchman Kurosawa (Naoto Takenaka in his first of many collaborations with the director[11]) to retrieve it by any means necessary.

The evening of her meeting with Yu, Mai is hit in the streets by a truck and dies. The collision is no accident, since it's revealed that Kurosawa was behind the wheel (we see only his boots descending from the cabin of the truck, a shot reminiscent of a similar image in Steven Spielberg's Duel). Unable to live with her death, her father uploads Mai's memory, which he had stored on three compact discs, into her virtual copy, thus giving Frankenstein-like life to his creation. The digital girl, named Ai (a play on words, since 'ai' is both short for 'artificial intelligence' and the Japanese word for love), is conscious of the fact that she is a

Left: Yu (Kanji Harada) and friends visit Mai's scientist father (Tsunehiko Watase, r.)
Right: Hitoe Arakaki as Nao (l.) and Eriko Imai as Yoko.

copy of Hitomi's daughter and has to be informed that the girl who served as her model is dead. With his invention completely functional and Ai serving as his surrogate daughter, Hitomi destroys the discs that hold Mai's memory.

The awakening of Ai was foreseen by Kurosawa, who breaks into Hitomi's house to steal his creation. Confronted with the intruder, Hitomi releases Ai into cyberspace just before Kurosawa shoots him, thus keeping her out of the gunman's hands. Travelling through the ether, Ai appears on the laptop computer of the grieving Yu, who downloads her before disconnecting and making it impossible for Digital Ware to retrieve Ai through cyberspace. He then alerts Mai's friends Rika, Yoko and Nao. This quartet quickly finds itself chased by Kurosawa and his gunmen, while Yu falls in love with Mai's virtual counterpart. From this point on, the film offers little in the way of story, settling into a generic chase plot eventually leading to a contrived finale in which Kurosawa attempts to use Hitomi's invention for himself instead of surrendering it to his boss in the United States.

Andromedia is the first Miike film since 1991's *Eyecatch* Junction to feature female protagonists, but in the context of the film and Mike's approach they don't function primarily as women but as children. Gender is only important in so far as the film could be seen as the female version of his earlier, very masculine explorations of childhood *Naniwa Yûkyôden, Kenka* No *Hanamichi* and Kishiwada *Shônen Gurentai - Chikemuri Junjô Hen.* Despite the characters being aged in their teens, they have a strong sense of nostalgia for early childhood. *Andromedia* contains numerous flashbacks to the pre-teen and junior high school years of Mai and Yu (most of them shot on digital video, an appropriate choice given the subject matter).

This nostalgia can be explained through the transformation of Mai into Ai. Continuing on the theme of physiological rootlessness through transformation that was at the heart of *Full Metal Gokudô,* the virtual version of Mai is only partially her old self. Ai is robbed of her body and of most of her senses, leaving only her memory to connect her to Mai's past. Since

Mai was only a teenager when she died, that memory naturally covers only her childhood. Yu can no longer express his love for Mai in a physical way, since Ai is only an image on his computer screen. Therefore memory becomes his only means of being close to her.

Childhood here is symbolised by the cherry tree under which Yu and Mai shared their first kiss. Standing isolated on a beach and always in bloom, it suggests that memories of childhood are everlasting and a constant, defining element of our personalities. The symbol of the cherry tree wasn't chosen by accident. After all, trees blossom before they bear fruit, in other words: life is at its most beautiful before maturity (Mai's references to the changes in her own body serve as an analogy.) Miike furthermore makes good use of the symbolic value of the cherry tree in the scene of Mai's death. Just after she is hit by the truck – on a street lined with blossoming trees – petals fall down onto the blood-covered asphalt to emphasise the contrast between the child and her violent death (this is one of the few examples in which the two sides of the film manage to complement each other).

Stills of *Andromedia* courtesy of Tokyo Broadcasting System

The cherry tree as symbol of youth

In addition to childhood, the film also accentuates the family unit. There is the group formed by Yu and Mai's friends, banding together because the group is stronger than the individual. More significantly there is Mat's family and the presence of her father. This family is already a disintegrated unit, which in the course of the story falls apart entirely through the deaths of its remaining members. Hitomi himself is already a widower when we first meet him. Then his daughter dies, followed by the revelation that he has an estranged son called Satoshi (Ryô Karato), a former computer hacker dying from a brain tumour. Satoshi is hired by Digital Ware, whose computer he hacked 10 years earlier, to help search for the laptop and make his father's invention ready for use by Zacker. To get hold of the computer

he plays on the emotions of Mai's friend Rika (Takako Uehara), who feels abandoned and betrayed by her friend's death and who secretly carries a torch for Yu. Rika's subsequent betrayal of her friends in turn threatens their group unit.

While its exploration of the theme of childhood may be sound, *Andromeda* suffers in other departments. Many of its characters are poorly motivated or in some cases don't even have a function within the narrative, effectively making them superfluous to the plot. The presence of the four members of the boy band Da Pump as Yu's friends is negligible in terms of screen time, while their function within the story is zero. The band gets a moment all to itself to perform one of their hits, but this effort to expand their screen time only emphasises the fact they are superfluous characters. (Their function in terms of audience appeal is undeniable however, since their presence attracts the fans of two bands into the theaters instead of just one). Their performance set piece is interspersed with sequences of the other characters going about their business (including a brief cameo by Yasushi Kitamura[12] as a shaven-headed street punk), but these moments don't advance the plot in any way, unlike the montages in many of Miike's other films. Interestingly, even though Speed are the stars of the film and their fans are its primary target audience, the four girls don't get a similar performance spot. In fact, only one of their songs is used in the film, but not until the closing credits.

Other superfluous characters come in the shape of Yu's teacher (played by Tomorowo Taguchi) and Mai's friends Yoko and Nao (Eriko Imai and Hitoe Arakaki). Taguchi's teacher is bribed by Satoshi to spy on his pupil, but the character never becomes more than comic relief: an authority figure who can't match the resourcefulness of his teenage students. Imai and Arakaki are in the film because Speed consists of four members, but unlike their colleagues Shimabukuro as Mai and Uehara as Rika, they have little to do but tag along with Yu.

The villains of the film may not be without function, but the problem with the characters of Zacker and Kurosawa is that they lack motivation. Neither of the two appears to have much of an agenda and they are evil simply because the plot requires villains. Zacker motivates his wish to get hold of Hitomi's invention as "I guess I just want it because it's there", which might explain his character as being a technophile whiz kid, but is not enough reason for his villainy. This leaves only the obligatory megalomania.

Similarly, Kurosawa's choice to use the invention on himself instead of handing it to his employer is not only unmotivated, it also makes no sense when it has been established that the recording of memory only works in combination with a virtual copy of the person in question. And when he undergoes the treatment, Kurosawa has no such digital alter ego.

Finally there is Satoshi's dubious choice to join Digital Ware. In the light of his brain tumour it would be more plausible for him to reconcile his differences with his family instead of choosing to side with the people who murdered his father and sister. His decision seems to only serve as a set-up for his later change of heart, when he helps Yu and his friends by hacking into the Digital Ware mainframe again and sabotaging Kurosawa's plan in the middle of its execution (which forces the villain to eternally relive the childhood trauma of his dog dying).

All these problems with the characters go to show how perfunctory the main plot of the film is handled and that out of the entire story only the relationship between Yu and Mai/Ai works. This perfunctory approach and the film's aim to please a target audience are also witnessed by its emphasis on superficial visual stylistics. The extensive use of computer graphics, the moving camera and the colourful sets and locations have little intent

Left: Kurosawa (Naoto Takenaka) displays his villainy, with Rika (Takako Uehara) as his hapless victim
Right: Mai's friends find themselves prisoners of the evil software corporation.

beyond making the proceedings look exciting. In a break with developments in the directors preceding films, the style in *Andromedia* serves no narrative function. Characters and situations are established through dialogue rather than through images or montage, resulting in copious amounts of verbal exposition.

Though it's not more than a footnote, the film also serves as a curious relic to the late-1990s fad for virtual idols, which formed the subject of the novel by Hirotake Watanabe on which it is based. This phenomenon made many a believer prophesise that digitally created fashion models, TV presenters and pop singers would soon make their human counterparts redundant. In transferring the novel to film – its plot significantly altered in the process – the opposite happened: a human actress played a virtual creation. A computer-generated image is only used for Ai in the early scenes of the film. From the moment the character is uploaded with Mai's memory Hiroko Shimabukuro takes over the role of Ai, and the difference between the human actress and the emotionless computer graphic is enormous.

Regardless of the film's weaknesses, the commercial intentions of *Andromedia*'s producers were rewarded. In terms of box office revenue it became Miike's most successful film, a position it would continue to hold for three and a half years, until *Ichi the Killer* bested it. After the praise garnered by The *Bird* People in China, the commercial success of *Andromedia* also made Takashi Miike a bankable director, resulting in him being offered more projects for theatrical release. In the years that followed, he would return to V-cinema only intermittently.

BLUES HARP

1998

The plot of *Blues Harp* is a strongly convoluted affair. A young gangster named Kenji starts an affair with the mistress of his boss, so that she will help him switch the boss' testament for a fake, which designates Kenji as his successor. With the second-in-command of a rival gang he plans to have the boss killed so he can take over, in return for which he will have the rival leader killed so his fellow conspirator will likewise usurp the top position.

What gives this overplotted storyline its validity is the fact that Kenji (Seiichi Tanabe) is a closet homosexual. Like Ujiie in *The Bird People in China*, he is forced to deny his own identity because of the rules and expectations of the yakuza society he belongs to. Because of this, *Blues Harp* plays not on the level of plot but on the level of the characters: for Kenji, becoming the leader of the yakuza is an outsider's ultimate revenge on the society that put him in his outcast position. That his methods are far-fetched is of no concern to him. As he puts it, if he didn't strive to struggle free of his status "I will have nothing to live for." This makes him different from most of Miike's outcasts, since he is in fact inside society, not on the outside of it. But he is as much forced into his position as those on the outside are forced into theirs, the denial of his identity being a method of self-protection. It's for this reason that Kenji looks to avenge himself, instead of following the route that Miike's outcasts normally take and forming a group unit. Creating such a unit requires the acknowledgement of his outcast status and this is exactly what he is unable to do. In the course of the film only one other character finds out Kenji's secret, by accident.

The plight of the outcast is the film's central theme, but not only Kenji's. *Blues Harp* is set in Yokosuka, a town south of Yokohama that is home to an American naval base and which therefore has a large foreign population[13]. The second protagonist Chuji (Hiroyuki Ikeuchi) is the son of a Japanese mother and an African-American father. Born on Okinawa, also known for its US military presence, he derives a sense of comfort from the jet fighters that scream through the skies over Yokosuka. Chuji's outsider status is illustrated in several ways, both through his own actions and the people around him: he deals drugs in the streets at night, works as a bartender and occasional harmonica player at a blues club owned by a homosexual musician (Mickey Curtis) and his father is that ultimate example of the outcast, a homeless person-who lives in a box underneath an express way and seems quite happy with his situation (Chuji's father lives with two fellow vagrants and this group unit has given him a substitute home).

The way the film portrays the foreigners fits in with the central theme of the outcast, since there is little evidence of integration. We see two Americans in Chuji's club bothering a Japanese girl. Chuji and the singer of the house band Yuya (Atsushi Okuno) come to her aid, resulting in a fight. Two Iranians are hired to kill a yakuza and are dumped into the sea in vats filled with concrete by the victim's associates. Illustrative of the relationship between natives and foreigners is the scene in which Chuji and Tokiko (Saori Sekino), the girl he saved from the harassing Americans, look out across the military base. Chuji compares the compound with Dejima, the peninsula outside Nagasaki on which Dutch traders were sequestered by the shôgun during the Edo period. But what most symbolically

expresses the relationship is the image of avideogame Chuji plays in an arcade, which depicts an Asian character fighting an American GI in hand-to-hand combat and winning. It also conveys the fact that Chuji's identity is more Japanese than American. Even though we briefly hear him speak English in one scene, he uses Japanese even when talking to his father.

His work in the blues club reveals another aspect about Chuji's character, that of him being a Miike alter ego. He works in a club frequented by American soldiers, similar to Miike's own experiences at the Soul Train club in Yokohama. Even the location is very much alike, since Yokosuka is only a few kilometres from Yokohama and in the same prefecture. Indeed, the soldiers who frequented Soul Train were stationed at the base in Yokosuka.

The presence of the blues club in the narrative also forms the basis for the director's stylistic approach to this film, which is largely based on music. Blues Harp contains not one but several montages set to music, starting with the opening credit sequence which starts from premise of a performance in the club, with the rhythm and beat influencing the editing of the sequence. The ensuing montage mixes exposition in the shape of Kenji's running battle with rival gangsters, with candid shots of local colour filmed on the streets of Yokosuka, consisting of close-ups of people's faces, buildings, neon signs and the American military presence. Also mixed in are moments from later on in the film, something that also ties in with the music influence, since the feverishly jumping backwards and forwards could be seen as a visual equivalent to scratching.

Although it's been noted that Kenji takes no action to form a group unit, he is united through fate with fellow outcast Chuji. When Kenji hides out in the alley next to the club after his battle with the gangsters, Chuji, emerging to smoke a cigarette, sends his pursuers on their way by claiming he neither has seen nor knows the man they're after. After Tokiko takes care of the knife wound in Kenji's shoulder with the sewing skills she learned working part-time for a veterinarian, the young yakuza hides out at Chuji's place for the night. The first insinuation that Kenji might be gay comes when he stares at Chuji's naked body asleep on the bed. This insinuation is severely undermined several scenes later when we see Kenji having sex with Reiko, the mistress of his boss. But this scene only serves to intensify what comes next, which leaves no doubt about Kenji's sexuality: he frantically brushes his teeth in the shower, trying to cleanse himself of the experience of having had sex with a woman. It perfectly illustrates his position as an outcast and his inability to openly acknowledge his identity. Now that we know he is homosexual, it makes us realise even more how precarious his position must be if he would go so far as to violate his own nature.

Kenji's wish to become leader is also the result of the humiliation he is subjected to as a member of his hierarchy. Despite his abilities as a gangster, his superiors treat him like a worthless novice and the smallest mistake is cause for a beating. Kenji's situation is ironically mirrored in that of his own underling Kaneko (Bob Suzuki), who harbours a secret crush on him but similarly never makes his feelings known, precisely because Kenji shows no indication that he is gay. In other words, by continuing to deny his own identity, Kenji creates in Kaneko a mirror image of himself, his behaviour forcing Kaneko to keep his true self a secret just like the yakuza force this in Kenji. The underling also turns to secret schemes, not to move up in the world (because he sublimated his unanswered love into dutiful devotion he is happy to remain Kenji's aid), but out of jealousy. When the Okada gang-the rivals who are in cahoots with Kenji – need a proxy to take the fall for the murder of Kenji's boss,

Kenji (Seiichi Tanabe, r.) and Chuji (Hiroyuki Ikeuchi, center) confront Hanamura (Daisuke Iijima)

Kaneko gives them Chuji. When he confesses his deed to Kenji, the mirror image is once again repeated as Kenji beats him badly for betraying Chuji.

The character of Kaneko is perhaps the film's most tragic character and its biggest outcast. Slightly overweight, with a receding hairline and taste for colourful jackets, he looks awkwardly out of place in his role as a yakuza, something even a pair of shades can't hide. It's further emphasised by the fact that like Chuji he is of mixed ethnic background. Exactly which combination remains unclear but this lack of clarity fits in very well with Kaneko's inferior status; Kenji may think of himself as an outcast, but at least people pay attention to him. Kaneko on the other hand is ignored by nearly everyone except the man he shares a sauna with at a public bathhouse.

Stills of *Blues Harp* courtesy of Nikkatsu

Kaneko's underhand scheme points to the solitary way in which the film's outcasts act: despite their acquaintance Kenji and Chuji never form a group, while Kenji and Kaneko keep secrets from each other despite their professional closeness, the same way Chuji hides his drug dealing and trouble with the yakuza from Tokiko when the two start a relationship. These solitary actions are the cause of the characters' downfall: Kenji's deceit of Reiko, Kaneko's jealousy, Chuji's drug dealing. Even though Kenji comes to Chuji's aid and the two manage to kill Kenji's boss Hanamura (Daisuke Iijima), upon their return to the club Chuji has to go on stage to deliver the performance that might get him a record deal, while the wounded Kenji sits outside in the alley again like he did at the start of the film. Only this time Chuji isn't there to help him when two hitmen show up to take revenge for the death of Hanamura. The two protagonists split up instead of banding together and death is the result.

The way Miike visualises their demise is interesting because of how it creates suggestion through the juxtaposition of images, particularly the killing of Chuji, which is not shown. As he is on stage performing his harmonica solo the two gunmen make their way through the cheering crowd. As they near the stage and grab their guns, Miike cuts to Chuji falling to his knees while blowing a high note as the backing band goes silent, then to a black screen. We then fade in on Tokiko sitting beside an empty stage stroking her pregnant belly and blowing on Chuji's harmonica, trying to play the tune her boyfriend learnt from his father as a child.

There are a number of such entirely visual moments in Blues *Harp* that despite their lack of words convey a lot of information.The scenes between Chuji and his father are nearly all wordless and its through a juxtaposition of images that we find out that the vagrant truly is Chuji's father. When Reiko discovers Kenji scrubbing himself in the shower after having sex with her, Miike shows her hurt and feeling of having been betrayed with a close-up of the blood that trickles down the inside of her thigh.

The film also has a few less successful stylistic choices, moments that come across as little more than imitations of other filmmakers' stylistic trademarks. The climactic gunfight sees Kenji using two guns at once in slow motion, in a way that is immediately reminiscent of the work of John Woo, while the fidgety handheld camerawork and saturated fluorescent colours in one dialogue scene are pale copies of the characteristic style of Wong Kar-Wai (perhaps inspired by Miike's and Hideo Yamamoto's meeting with Wong's cameraman Christopher Doyle on *Andromedia).* The former scene is at least vindicated in some way by the fact that much of the battletakes place off screen, but the latter is an entirely unmotivated rupture with the style of the rest of the film.

Though not without its own flaws, Blues *Harp* is still a vast improvement over *Andromedia,* particularly when we compare the integration (or lack thereof in the latter's case) of music into the fabric of both films. The film Miike made next, however, would leave them both trailing far behind in every respect.

KISHIWADA SHÔNEN GURENTAI – BÔKYÔ

1996

In every sense of the word, Kishiwada *Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* [lit: Boy hooligans from Kishiwada – nostalgia] is the apogee of Miike's depiction of the childhood idyll. Whereas in previous films he increasingly depicted teenagers on the verge of adulthood, here he steps further back and portrays the world of children who are barely teenagers.

For his sequel to a sequel, Miike presents the early childhood of Riichi Nakaba in the closing days of the 1960s and the family he grew up in – eternally on the verge of falling apart, but never actually becoming a broken home.The shadow of the boy's father Toshio (Naoto Takenaka), a violence-prone, anti-social lout, looms large over the family and over Riichi (Yûki Nagata, who played the childhood version of Takenaka's character in *Andromedia*), for whom the image of masculinity his father presents is at once frightening and attractive. Dad beats his wife and son, drinks, gambles and sleeps around with Akemi, a dancer at the local strip club who he, after one particular nights binge, even takes home to meet his wife. When Riichi was born, Toshio briefly swung by the hospital with half a dozen friends in tow to verify if his child was a boy, and upon seeing the confirmation collecting the money he bet on it from his friends. Despite naming his son after a mah-jong term, Toshio is proud of the boy's fighting prowess. Pronouncing the bruises Riichi sustained in a fight with his eternal nemesis Sada to be proof of his son's manliness, he lets the boy drink his first bottle of beer during a party for all the men in the neighbourhood (only for Riichi to vomit it up while playing flute in class the next morning).

Miike depicts this family portrait in a way that's far from sentimental, opting for exaggeration and humour instead of tragedy. The childhood idyll and its inherent invulnerability make it impossible for the events to be portrayed for their tragic potential. This doesn't mean the emotional impact is any less; the impact simply comes from a different source than the father's treatment of his family. It lies instead in the way Miike treats the children. Continuing on his portrayal of the boy Chen in *Rainy* Dog, the children, both as characters and as actors, are treated with respect, equality and empathy. The director puts himself at their level, seeing and showing the world through the children's eyes. One result of this approach is that there are no 'cute' children to be found in this film. Cuteness is not a feeling children have towards each other, it's an adult perspective that effectively looks down on children and projects a characteristic onto them that isn't theirs. The portrayal of a child as cute is a sign that the filmmaker is not emphatic towards his characters. In *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* there is equality between the director and his subjects, but also between the children themselves, all of whom almost constantly walk around with bruised faces.

Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô continues the use of fighting as a symbol for youth. And since these kids are younger than most of those previously depicted by the director, they fight even more than their adolescent counterparts, to the point where getting into scuffles is a normal part of their lives. Miike keeps these battles resolutely off screen, however, instead suggesting the course of the fights by way of their outcome, rightly counting on the fact that the cuts, burns and bruises on these kids' faces say enough.

What he does show are the punches dealt out by Riichi's father, including those that hit his son. But like in his battles with Sada, Riichi hits back here too. In fact, the chasm between father and son is filled when Riichi gives Toshio a sound beating with a baseball bat. Like Miike's previous Osaka-set films, the focus here is again strongly masculine. Riichi's long-suffering mother dutifully tends to domestic affairs, taking her husbands boorish behaviour in her strides. It's not until Toshio brings home his stripper girlfriend that she breaks down, packs up and leaves the house. Despite the male dominance, the film certainly doesn't marginalize its female characters. Riichi's teacher miss Ito (Saki Takaoka) is one of the few adults in the boy's world to treat him with respect, although she never lets her authority slip. It's no surprise that Riichi returns the feelings and falls in love with her. In another case, the seemingly peripheral portrayal of a female character actually turns out to be one of the film's most successful examples of visual storytelling: a classmate of Riichi's is only intermittently seen, but those few occasions nevertheless combine to tell the characters development from child to adolescent. She never says a word during this entire process and only in her final scene does she speak, saying a brief hello to Riichi as she passes him on the street.

It's been noted previously how the setting of Osaka represents the 'real' in Miike's films, as opposed to the myth of Kabukichô in many of the director's gangster films; a real that results largely from Miike adding personal experiences and memories of growing up in Osaka. In *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* that autobiographical element is more apparent than ever, manifesting itself in numerous ways. The film is built upon a basis of personal memories from the period, many of them accurately pertaining to the years 1969 and 1970 in which the story is set. Most of these are seen on the television screen in the Nakaba household, since it is as TV broadcasts that the director lived them himself: Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon, student riots in Tokyo, the Minamata pollution scandal and the Vietnam war. The theme song to the 1970 World Expo in Osaka provides a closing comment, its lyrics sending a *konnichi wa* to the world and expressing hope for a bright future. But all the global events that parade by on the screen remain distant echoes. Life in Kishiwada goes on as it always has, with the same faces and the same habits. Despite Riichi and his mother discovering their father on TV fighting riot police on the side of the students in Tokyo, he is back home a few days later with his old habits intact after which mother packs her bags again to leave once more.

The image of the parents also mirrors Miike's own life. Riichi's mother finds a job as a seamstress, while Toshio is nothing if not an exaggerated image of Miike's own father's love for drinking and gambling. The autobiographical elements abound in *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô*, even the Ennio Morricone / spaghetti western-style music (by Kôji Endô once again) that accompanies Riichi's confrontations with Sada functions as a reference to the late sixties, instead of being a post-modern wink for its own sake.

The directors personal attachment is not just apparent in occasional details, but influences his entire approach to the material. It's this attachment that is at the heart of the dignity with which the child characters are portrayed and the child actors handled, which prompts some delightful performances from the young cast. It also makes the film one of Miike's most emotionally involving works. Though filled with punch-ups and bruises, the childhood idyll was rarely as idyllic as it is here. Since these children are barely in their teens, the childhood idyll is never broken by impending maturity and the children's invulnerability is present in everything they do.

TENNEN SHÔJO MANN

1999

Miike's first television production in seven years (since 1992's Last Run), *Tennen Shôjo* Mann [lit: Natural girl Mann] is an adaptation of a manga series by Tetsuya Koshiba, about a schoolgirl with extraordinary fighting prowess.

Though a series, it plays less like an episodic serial than a self-contained three and a half hour film. Perhaps the experiences and observations Miike gained in his days as an assistant on numerous long-running series had an influence on this, since *Tennen Shôjo Mann* lacks all their counter-creative characteristics: there are no flat characters, no perfunctory plot, no artificial climaxes or cliffhangers. What sets it most apparently apart from the average TV serial is the fact that *Tennen Shôjo Mann's* 3,5 hours are divided into only three essentially feature-length episodes, which individually run longer than many of the director's early V-cinema films. But these three episodes are basically sections of what is structured as one long film. The only concession that has been made to the serialised form is the inclusion of various flashbacks, which for the most part appear at the very beginning of each section as a summary of what went before or which are otherwise fairly well integrated into the narrative.

Despite the outward differences, *Tennen Shôjo Mann* is remarkably similar to Miike's , cycle of nostalgia films *Kenka No Hanamichi, Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai- Chikemuri Junjô Hen* and *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai — Bôkyô.* It too is a portrait of the childhood idyll in which fighting represents the energy and spirit of youth, set among teenagers whose punch-ups never result in long-term injury or harm. However, *Tennen Shôjo Mann* is not set in Osaka in the 1970s, but in contemporary Tokyo and its characters are nearly all female. This difference results in a change in approach'on the part of the filmmaker. Although it shares the emphatic and respectful portrayal of children of *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai — Bôkyô,* the director's personal attachment which was so evident in that film is absent from *Tennen Shôjo Mann.* The director's point of view is that of an outsider looking in, observing the behaviour, the codes and the habits of a group that is not his. However, these observations are made without passing judgment and therein lies the reason for the emphatic approach to the characters.

This increased distance is also the source for a number of other differences with the aforementioned three films. The open-ended structure of these is here replaced by a more plotted narrative with a proper resolution. Since the director has no personal attachment to story and characters, he approaches the film more as fiction, complete with neatly resolved plot. Additionally, thefilmmaker'sdistancealso reducestheemotional impact. While *Tennen Shôjo Mann* shares the exaggerated, humorous tone of *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai — Bôkyô,* here it results in a film that is light-hearted rather than emotional, and entertaining rather than touching. Furthermore the relationship between protagonist and nemesis is less clearly defined in *Tennen Shôjo Mann.* Instead of an eternal struggle between two individuals, the series is structured as a West *Side* Story-esque plot of rival gangs and turf wars, as echoed in the suitably exaggerated title for each episode, which translate as 'Spain Slope Violent Battle', 'Park Road Retaliation' and 'Shibuya Blood Feud'. The film's conflicts arise from various groups engaging each other with the attitude that "This town isn't big enough for the both of us".

When his mother leaves home for the first time, Riichi runs away the following morning. With his friends Tetsuo, whose grandmother was taken to a nursing home, and Yuji, who like in the previous film seems to have no clear opinions of his own, he decides to walk to Shikoku (one of Japan's four main islands, south of Osaka). Mistaking the scale of the map, they end up walking for days before they even reach the coast. In this time they sleep on the streets, drink with bums and find food where they can, but thanks to their invulnerability they never once are at serious risk. It's in this freedom from the constraints of reality (without ever losing sight of it) that the film's greatest strength lies. Here the childhood idyll is the result of the filmmaker approaching his subject through the eyes of a child, but with the nostalgia of an adult, resulting in a point of view from which no deeds are ever severe and no harm is ever serious.

The combination of the child's naïve view and the adult's nostalgic view is expressed particularly well in one scene at the end of the boys' failed trip to Shikoku. When they finally reach the seaside, Riichi meets a fisherman (fittingly played by the real Riichi Nakaba) who sits by the water making a drawing of mountains. When Riichi asks him why he's drawing mountains when he's looking at the sea, the fisherman simply replies that he can see mountains. This answer makes Riichi realise that life doesn't necessarily get better from running away, since it's no guarantee that wherever he ends up will be better than back home, but instead that he should make the best of whatever situation he is in by using his imagination. Riichi promptly turns around and heads back to Kishiwada.

The fisherman's message is remarkably similar to the philosophy of hooker Lily in Rainy Dog, except that it expresses hope instead of fear. It doesn't just set up a predicament, but offers a possible way out. That way out is in the imagination rather than being a physical destination, like the rootless characters in many of Miike's films, who dream of escaping their situation to an envisioned utopia where their rootlessness will cease to be. But unlike his adult counterparts in such films as Rainy Dog, *Ley* Lines and The *City of Lost* Souls, the child Riichi realises that it is dreaming the dream itself – or using one's imagination – that matters, not the destination.

After Riichi and his friends return to their hometown, they enthusiastically start work on their own version of the Apollo lunar lander, using found wood, aluminiom foil stolen from a local grocery store (the shot of Tetsuo trying to run away with his pants stuffed full of rolls of foil is a perfect example of the film's emotional impact), and sheets of corrugated iron wrenched from the house of their nerdy gym teacher. When Sada and his gang destroy the work in progress, Riichi and Tetsuo strike back and destroy the gang, forcing them to rebuild the contraption. Of course the structure they built will never lift so much as an inch off the ground, but the boys use their imagination and dream their dream by building it.

Although *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* can't be called autobiographical in the strictest sense of the word – it is after all not based on the life of the director and perhaps even the similarities with the real life of Riichi Nakaba are questionable -but Miike's strong personal attachment to the characters, the period and the location are evident. This attachment makes *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* one of his most emotionally satisfying films. It's also a very successful symbiosis of form and content, since nostalgia and the child's point of view pervade this film on every level. It is one of the most crucial, defining and representative films in the director's oeuvre, the apogee of the theme of nostalgia. *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* is, in short, one of Miike's greatest achievements as a filmmaker.

Change in tone notwithstanding, *Tennen Shôjo Mann* nevertheless holds a good deal of interest, as a part of Miike's work but also in its own right as a piece of cinema. It strongly adheres to the director's recurring themes in that these characters are outcasts as a result of being young and female. Miike makes this position clear in two ways, one narrative and the other stylistic. Firstly, on a narrative level, the girls are throughout the film harassed by men of various ages: lusty businessmen, gropers on the train, peeping toms secretly taking pictures and scouts hoping to lure them into nude modelling or worse. Secondly, on a stylistic level, the digital video format is employed to emphasise the distance between the characters and the rest of society. Although its use is a result of budget constraints, Miike exploits the mobility of the digital video camera very deliberately and much to his advantage by shooting wild in the streets of Shibuya and Harajuku, the busy areas of Tokyo favoured as hang-outs by the city's youth. Miike not only utilises the crowds to effectively add ambiance, but also by shooting with small handheld cameras and a minimal crew (all exteriors were shot without sound, thus eliminating the need for a sound crew) he is able to let the characters and the narrative manoeuvre through the crowd, creating something akin to the black society of *Shinjuku Triad Society*. the girls' lives and conflicts play out under the noses of the adult masses without any of those adults noticing it, effectively putting the characters outside everyday society. This sense of exclusion is further enhanced by the fact that despite being schoolgirls wearing school uniforms, they never go anywhere near a school. Their uniforms serve as a tool to visually set them apart from the rest of society.

This visual tool also functions to define the characters as a group. In Miike's hands, the habits of schoolgirls to form groups and act alike becomes a parallel to the group units established by the director's other outcasts. Although this group (i.e. school girls) is initially divided into feuding cells, in the course of the story each of them comes to realise that they are united by a common fate in society, and they band together to form a single group unit in order to battle the threat that comes at them from outside. In keeping with subject and theme, this threat consists of an organisation of scouts led by two adults, one of whom develops an unhealthy obsession for protagonist Mann Kôda (Jun Matsuda).

Despite the emphasis on the group unit, this protagonist is in turn something of an outsider in her own group, in the sense that Mann's fighting skills and strength set her apart from her friends. This exceptional position (which the title of the series already alludes to) is underlined from the first scenes of the first episode, in which Mann is introduced separately from her friends. While these friends chat at a fast food restaurant, Mann is wolfing down a pile of conveyor belt sushi nearby. Her eating habits already establish her as being different from the average schoolgirl, an impression further accentuated when she takes revenge on the middle-aged *salaryman* who tried to chat her up, by leaving him with the bill for her gargantuan meal. In the streets she crosses her friends, who are on their way to a photo shoot with popular model Azumi (Natsumi Yokoyama), a former Shibuya schoolgirl who went on to modelling fame after being spotted in the streets by talents scouts. The girls try their best to impress the scouts, but the attention of the men is instead caught by Mann, who cares little for the shoot and is instead helping three little boys in trouble with a broken soft drinks machine. She lands a series of punches onto the device, causing a mountain of cans to come falling out. When one of the talent scouts (Kôji Tsukamoto in a small role that is basically a running gag) runs after her, Mann dealswith his persistencewith another firm punch.

This series of sequences establishes the character of Mann entirely through her actions, both her individual personality and her position within the group. The characters are all largely established and defined through visual means, and their behaviour gives a lot more clues about their personalities than their words, which although numerous say very little of any significance.The words here function as a way for the girls to adhere to the codes of the group unit, but the non-verbal information they give reveals their individuality (as in the opening scene where Mann's friend Yukari (Yuki Matsuoka) draws a tear on a Polaroid of herself while the conversation with the other girls continues in a constant, excited tone). The success of this visual approach to the storytelling is made all the more clear by episode three, which tends to get bogged down in reconciliatory dialogue scenes and lacks the light-hearted, fast-paced feel of the previous two instalments as a result.

Mann's main motivation is also set up visually. A flashback to her early childhood sees her being bullied by three boys, who kick sand in her face and stomp on her doll until the little Mann suddenly strikes back and beats them all up. This scene, wordless, shows that Mann's powers manifested themselves as a result of being bullied, a natural defence against harassment. It's therefore logical that she would use her powers against those who trouble her and her friends. This opens up an interesting discourse: by presenting Mann as a defender against harassment (male sexual harassment to be precise), the character seemingly becomes if not exactly feminist then at least a vicarious fantasy for urban girls. This is quite a change from the source material, which is a comic book targeted at adolescent boys. A comic book that furthermore is often quite sexually explicit and features ample female nudity. In the TV series there isn't a trace of sex or nudity to be found. The odd glimpse of white underwear in a fight scene is as explicit as it gets. By changing the sexual politics, Miike seems to change the entire aim of the material from a boy's fantasy into a girl's. However, *Jennen Shôjo* Mann is not a feminist film or even a film with a female perspective. The fact that it revolves around fighting betrays a masculine point of view, witness its similarity to *Kenka No Hanamichi* and the *Kishiwada* films and the differences with the much more feminine symbolism of the cherry tree used in *Andromeda.*

Although it might be argued that *Tennen Shôjo Mann* portrays the emancipatory sight of women using a masculine activity (fighting) to defeat men on their own turf, it's a male authority figure that Mann turns to for help when she is at first ostracised from her group and then beaten by her rival Riona (Runa Nagai).This young man, Kazuya (Yoshihiko Hakamada), subjects her to a very physical and therefore masculine training regimen. Under his stern guidance she regains her strength, her confidence and her position within the group, and in the end it allows her to defeat her enemies. Kazuya remains the only person she is unable to beat in a fight and it is largely as a result of this that she falls in love with him.

All of these elements reveal the male point of view at the heart of *Jennen Shôjo Mann,* a conclusion that should not however be confused with a paternalistic attitude. As noted before, the director approaches both the characters and the actors with empathy and respect, and never once does he look down on his subjects. The characters have dignity and the performances are appealing and charismatic, particularly Matsuda's as Mann, whose down-to-earth looks furthermore keep the character human instead of an unrealistic superhuman ideal for boys and girls alike.

Tennen Shôjo Mann's cast is undeniably the product of the idol system assembly line -the actresses playing these characters are the same girls who appear in swimsuits

on the covers of weekly boys' manga magazines like Young Magazine, from which the series originated (a marketing strategy that reveals that the TV series was indeed aimed at a male audience, offering the teenage readers the chance to see their favourite manga characters brought to life in the shape of their favourite swimsuit models). However, neither the series nor the performances deserve to be dismissed for the simple reason that the actresses are manufactured idols rather than trained thespians. Much like Miike didn't dismiss his actresses and coaxed effective, appealing performances from them as a result, an unprejudiced approach to *Tennen Shôjo Mann* will reveal to the determined viewer a good deal of quality filmmaking and a characteristic Miike work.

LEY LINES

Nihon Kuroshakai ➡ Ley Lines

1999

Ley Lines is the quintessential Miike film. It's the one work in his fitmography that encompasses all of his recurring themes and whose plot follows almost exactly the process between those themes as outlined in chapter 2. But it's not only a signature film from a thematic point of view, but also in its style, reuniting various stylistic tools that have characterised his previous work and even launching a new one whose use he would continue in the works that followed.

The third in the director's unofficial *kuroshakai* trilogy, the film's Japanese title translates as Japan Black Society. While the term kuroshakai pointed to unseen things going on underneath the surface of everyday life, here the point is made that Japan as a whole is a black society and that the ugly thing it propagates is discrimination and the exclusion of all those it feels do not belong. A society that creates outcasts through its own refusal to accept anything (or anybody) that deviates from the norm. The first two scenes of the film immediately establish this. First we see two boys being harassed by five other kids, derided for being different. The footage looks worn and scratched, like an old home movie, thereby indicating that we're watching a flashback (it's a technique Miike uses throughout this career, from *Kenka No Hanamichi* to *Sabu*). Next, one of these boys, now a young adult named Ryuichi (Kazuki Kitamura), is applying for a passport, only to hear the civil servant behind the counter (Kôji Tsukamoto) question his nationality and thereby his validity as a human being: "Are you really Japanese? When you live in Japan you have to follow Japanese rules." Ryuichi's application is refused, in response to which the young man picks up the large potted plant in the office and throws it at the bigot. It lands him a trip to the police station, where the officer lecturing him (Shun Sugata) proves to be equally contemptuous toward him.

By establishing society as discriminatory, these scenes also establish Ryuichi as an outcast. A rootless outcast, since the scenes that follow show that he is the son of Chinese immigrants. His rootless status, a son of China born in Japan, is indicated by the fact that while his parents speak Chinese. he and his younger brother Shunrei (Michisuke Kashiwaya) speak Japanese. While he feels no kindness for Japanese society, the world of his parents certainly doesn't attract him either. His father's stoic, uncommunicative attitude suggests that there is a gaping chasm between the two generations. When he sees his brother studying diligently, Ryuichi remarks that Shunrei should use his intellect to teach their father Japanese.

Before the plot has even properly started, the character of Ryuichi is already firmly established. With some friends he steals a scooter and tries to sell it to the owner of the local scrap yard (Ren Ôsugi). When the mechanic hurls further abuse at Ryuichi, the group beats him up and nearly crushes him under his own used cars. Realising they've gone too far, the boys decide to make a run for it. They meet early the next morning at the train station, but three of them get cold feet, leaving only Ryuichi and Chan (Tomorowo Taguchi successfully passing for someone half his real age) to take the train to Tokyo. This scene is shot in one take with a steadicam, encompassing the arrival at the station, the argument between the

boys outside, the arrival of the train, Ryuichi and Chan hurrying to catch it and ending inside the train on a medium close-up of Ryuichi. The scene runs two minutes, though it's not the length that impresses, but the way Miike uses space and depth of field. As the boys argue, first Chan appears from the station behind them, then the train pulls in. Ryuichi and Chan run through the station and enter the carriage, where the camera stops with a shot emphasising the perspective of the long train coach, and with the environment outside clearly visible through the windows on both sides.

The cinematography is especially worthy of note here, since it reunites Miike with Naosuke Imaizumi. As a result Ley Lines, like their previous collaboration *Shinjuku Triad Society,* features some startling use of colour. The colourscheme mainly functions to emphasise the difference between the two worlds the protagonists find themselves in. The small countryside town they escape from is surrounded by intensely green grass and vegetation, while the city's daytime exteriors are dominated by bleak grey that is replaced by bright reds, purples and blues at night.The colour red is used in particular for antagonistic characters: Shun Sugata's policeman fans himself with a sheet of red transparent plastic in an interrogation room otherwise bathed in green light, while the Chinese crime kingpin Wong (Naoto Takenaka as the film's main villain) spends most of his scenes in predominantly red interiors. As in the flashback that opens the film, a red tint covering the entire image is used in several moments as an omen of the bad things that follow.

The train ride from the boys' hometown and the big city has significance here beyond simply being a mode of transportation. Ryuichi and Chan share their carriage with a schoolgirl who takes off her short black socks and exchanges them for the loose white ones so popular among girls in Tokyo. The change is a visual indication of where the characters are heading (no previous information about their destination was given), but also implies that the place they're going is different from where they come from and will require a change in them as well. When Ryuichi looks away from the girl, he notices outside that his brother is chasing the train on a scooter. Shunrei has come to join them on their trip, but his late arrival suggests the hesitation inside him. As his devotion to his studies showed, he is not like his older brother, but apparently he feels the same dissatisfaction with his home life (in other words rootlessness) as Ryuichi.

These events make the train ride more than an obligatory scene. In fact its function ties in with the meaning of the film's title. Ley lines, a term first coined in England in the early 1920s[14], are straight lines or paths that connect various ancient or holy sites in a landscape. The term later received a more esoteric definition as the connections between centers of power on earth. In this film, there are three such centers of power for the protagonists: the countryside town they come from, the city they head to and the indistinct final destination they seek to reach in order to escape Japan's black society and find happiness.The train or more precisely the railroad, which takes them from the first to the second, therefore functions as a ley line. Its importance is already hinted at in a song we hear Ryuichi sing in a voice-over at the start of the film, which talks of a railroad and the unknown destination to which it ultimately leads.

The function of colour is illustrated well in the cut from the green environs of the railroad to the dull grey interior of a ramshackle apartment in Shinjuku. This juxtaposition is further intensified by the fact that this apartment is the home and laboratory of Ikeda (Show Aikawa), who manufactures toluene sold on the streets of Kabukichô as a narcotic (Ikeda

also wears predominantly grey clothes throughout the film). Continuing the contrast, when Ikeda opens his window for a breath of fresh air (he wears a gas mask when working with his chemicals), passing outside in the streets is Chinese prostitute Anita (Dan Li), who is on her way to a Chinese restaurant, on the first floor of which waits her client. The change from the green grass of the countryside to the drugs and prostitution of the city is somewhat more drastic than the schoolgirl's change of socks, but has essentially the same function.

When Anita enters the Chinese restaurant, occupying its only table are none other than Ryuichi, Shunrei and Chan. Aside from creating contrast, the first scene in the city also functions to link the characters of Ryuichi, Shunrei and Chan with Anita and Ikeda. Miike lets the characters by coincidence share the same space at the same time, as a way to pre-figure a later confrontation or union between them. This technique of creating a spatial link between characters he would continue to use numerous times in the films that followed, but is employed in Ley *Lines* for the first time.

When Anita finishes her work (which caused debris to fall down from the ceiling into the boys' food, thereby continuing the link) and comes back down, she sizes up the new arrivals and takes them with her to a dilapidated apartment building, where she picks their pockets and locksthem inside an empty flat (Anita, incidentally, wears a red jacket in this scene). The woman's actions are understandable when we get to know her life in the next scene. Coming back to her pimp (Far-Long Oh), she is beaten up for. not responding quickly enough when he asks her for the money she made. At least stealing the wallets of a trio of country bumpkins saved her from more sex (or worse) in dirty backrooms.

After the three boys have finally managed to break out of the apartment, we see them standing in the streets of Shinjuku in a shot that underlines that in this city too they are outcasts: it's raining and everyone in the streets carries an umbrella, except them. In this shot, they seem the only people in all of Tokyo who don't have shelter and safety (the symbolism of the umbrella is identical to that at the end of *Rainy Dog,* signifying luxury and comfort).

The solution to their empty pockets comes when Ryuichi encounters Barbie (Samuel Pop Aning), a young immigrant from Ghana who pushes Ikeda's toluene around Kabukichô. Barbie takes the three boys to meet his supplier and that same night the trio are themselves vending bottles of the chemical in the streets. The makeshift drug that is toluene fits in perfectly with the characters' position. They are such outcast that they aren't even allowed to sell a decent drug. It's only logical then that their colleague is a foreigner and their employer an amateur working out of his own apartment.

The scene in which the three boys try to sell the bottles underlines the fundamental difference in character between Ryuichi and Chan on the one hand and Shunrei on the other. Where the first two take an aggressive attitude, accosting as many people as they can and even pushing the stuff under people's noses for a free sample, Shunrei is entirely out of his element and wanders around aimlessly before deciding to simply display the bottles around him and wait for customers to come. Shunrei is effectively still a child. He may have abandoned his studies to be with his brother, but this sudden rupture has not meant the end of childhood. Inevitably the seediness of his new environment will have its effect on him, but at this point in the film he is still a child and it takes the help of Ryuichi and Ghan to get rid of his toluene supply. Then when the three pass the Chinese restaurant where they met Anita, Shunrei looks on in silence as his brother storms in and trashes the place in an attempt to find the woman who stole their money.

The theft becomes ever more understandable the more we get to see of Anita's life. Miike cuts directly from Ryuichi's rage to Anita going about her business elsewhere. In this case, business is a *salaryman* who on his lunch break drags her to another squalid apartment, ties her up in leather straps and reveals himself as a pierced-nippled fetish freak. Like all the regular people who, bought the toluene from the three protagonists, the scene of the *salaryman*'s hidden desires suggests that all the sordid underworld goings-on around Kabukichô in the end exist to service the demand of normal citizens. Normal of course being a relative term, since Anita emerges from her ordeal with her clothes torn and hardly able to walk. When her pimp, who has been waiting outside for the client to finish, sees her, his first reaction is to demand the money. When Anita attacks him in rage, he beats her up, takes the cash and leaves her behind in the garbage.

The scenes that follow this combine to form the turning point in the film, encompassing the completion of the group unit that puts an end to the failures of the individual outcasts as well as the passing of Shunrei from childhood into maturity. Miike first accentuates Shunrei's immaturity in order to add dramatic weight to his change. We see him again uncomfortably sitting on a curb with his bottles of toluene displayed around him. When he looks up he notices Anita passing by, in an even worse state than before after the beating she received from her pimp. (This scene is shot on a busy street in the center of Kabukichô with nocrowdcontrol, and the bruisedandbroken Anitastumblesaroundamid unwitting shoppers. Some of these stare at her in horror, but most seem to ignore her presence. Miike would do something similar in *Graveyard* of *Honour* three years later, more deliberately aimed at recording crowd reactions by shooting with a hidden camera.) Shunrei abandons his toluene to escort her home, where Anita goes into hysteria, throws the boy on the floor, pulls off his pants and mounts him, all the while yelling "Men are idiots!" before breaking down in tears on top of him. Anita's breakdown is the direct result of Shunrei's immaturity, which allows her to drop her guard and show her emotions. He escorts her home where every other man in her life either beats her up or pays to have sex with her. She recognises or at least senses this in Shunrei, as illustrated by the fact that she falls asleep in his arms afterwards.

What further underlines the character's immaturity is that at the same time as Shunrei's encounter with Anita, Ryuichi and Chan have a meeting with Wong, the leader of Chinese organised crime in Kabukicho. The meeting concerns fake passports, which will allow the three protagonists to leave Japan for the unknown destination where they hope to find happiness (Ryuichi's continued failure to get a passport is a symbol of his rootlessness, just as it was for the exiled gangster Yuji in *Rainy* Dog). Again it's the two of them who handle the affairs. Shunrei isn't even looking on from a distance, but is simply no longer present. This doesn't mean however that Ryuichi and Chan are good at what they do, since they too end up battered and bleeding in an alley. When they ask Wong how powerful exactly he is, the punches from his minions are the answer.

This creates a parallel between the boys and Anita. Their previous run-in may have created the impression that they were in different camps, but the truth of the matter is that she is as much an outcast as they are. This status was the reason for both her picking their pockets and them becoming victim to it. When Shunrei finds Ryuichi and Chan, and brings them back to the apartment, the bond between the three country boys and the prostitute is forged. Seeing the wounded and unconscious Ryuichi, Anita recognises that they are like

her. When Chan discovers a sign of life from his friend in the form of an erection, he pays Anita to have sex with him. For once, she gladly accepts and while she sits astride him, both she and Chan laugh. She can enjoy having sex with these young men who share her fate and after Shunrei and Ryuichi, Chan also gets his turn. By her fucking all three, the group unit is formed. They are all united and equal, especially after Shunrei emerges from childhood: while Anita mounts Ryuichi, the camera focuses on Shunrei sitting in a corner. At first he seems as distant and uncomfortable as ever, but as he hears the giggles from Chan and Anita, he too suddenly erupts in laughter. For the first time since his arrival in the city he embraces the situation, and his ability to do so marks the end of his childhood.

Even though the group has now been established and the characters are happier than ever before (illustrated by a scene of them having lunch on a rooftop, playing dare by balancing precariously on the ledge while eating), the boys still want to leave Japan and find happiness elsewhere ("I don't want to stay in this city!" yells Chan from the ledge, a moment similar to the inverted declaration of love to Taipei delivered by the same actor in Rainy *Dog*). Through a contact of Anita's they secure a place as stowaways on board a ship leaving from Kawasaki port to Brazil in several days. To get the money to pay for the trip they decide to rob Wong. Anita asks to join in, since she fears that if she stays in Tokyo she will end up getting killed by her pimp. Her involvement is as much out of revenge as out of fear, as shown when the four of them raid Wong's restaurant (with equal glee, even Shunrei joins in the fracas now) with a gun they secured through Barbie and a pair of stolen scooters. Anita finds her pimp among the crowd and kicks him firmly in the balls before making off with Ryuichi and the money.

Like he did at a few earlier instances in this film, here again Miike creates a parallel with *Rainy* Dog. We see the four protagonists escaping with the money on their scooters, cheering over the successful robbery. But like in the 1997 film, happiness brought on by money is only an illusion. Kôji Endô's accordion score, which accentuated this illusion, is suddenly interrupted by a gunshot. Barbie, who knew Ryuichi was up to something when he asked him for a gun, is waiting for them with Ikeda (Barbie, who throughout the film has worn black clothes, now wears red). The shot hits Chan in the stomach, and the scooters go down as the money is dispersed through the air. Ryuichi shoots Barbie, after which Ikeda grabs as much of the money as he can and runs off. Ryuichi, Shunrei and Anita hijack a car and flee with the bleeding Chan in the backseat, trying their best to keep him from losing consciousness.

As the four protagonists leave the city and head back home, Wong's men catch up first with the wounded Barbie, and then with Ikeda, who was about to make off with his toluene truck but ends up force-fed an overdose of his own supply. The deaths of these two characters at the hands of Wong was previously established in the same way Miike foreshadowed the meetings of the protagonists with Anita and Ikeda, earlier in the film. The scene in which Barbie told Ikeda about Ryuichi buying a gun also featured them crossing paths with Wong by coincidence, thus establishing a spatial link between Wong and Ikeda that functions to prefigure a future confrontation.

Ikeda's death scene is also the last scene set in the city. This way, the character of Ikeda, despite not having such a big role in the story, becomes symbolic for the experience of the outcasts life in the city. The first city scene was after all also of him, at work in his home laboratory. Ikeda bookends the Kabukichô section of the film, and like before, his presence is used as a contrast with the green countryside setting. Miike cuts from him, a grey

bulk under the toluene truck, to the four protagonists getting stranded with an overheated car somewhere in the country, surrounded by intensely green foliage.

The plot has so far followed the stages of Miike's thematic process faithfully: starting with rootless characters (their rootlessness underlined by the fact that they're in trouble with both Japanese and Chinese) who flnd themselves outcasts in a society that doesn't accept them, their outcast status forces them into a life of crime and violence, but they weather the adversity by forming a group with a kindred soul and dreaming of happiness in a distant utopia. The one thing still missing at this point is disintegration, which comes when they arrive in the country: Chan has died before they could get home. Ryuichi wants to leave Chan's body at a nearby temple, but gets into a heated argument with Shunrei, who wants to return their friend to his parents. The argument turns ugly when Ryuichi beats his brother for disagreeing with him, until Anita intervenes. She brings them to their senses, but the damage has been done and the process is irreversible, as signalled by the red tint that covers the next few scenes.

The three survivors walk along the railroad tracks back to the station in their hometown Shunrei takes a stolen bicycle to the house of Chan's parents to tell them about his death, while Ryuichi and Anita wait for him at the station. But on his way back, Shunrei is hit byatruckthatseemstoappearoutof nowhere.Asif sensing hisdemise, Ryuichistealsanother bike and with Anita on the back goes to look for his brother. They find his mangled bicycle and a disembodied hand before the same truck comes storming at Ryuichi, who recognises the driver as the owner of the scrap yard he almost killed. Even though they have left the city, they are outcasts wherever they go, particularly in their hometown. In chasing the young man, the truck crashes into a shack whose corrugated iron roof buries itself in the mechanic's neck, killing him instantly.

With only each other left, Ryuichi and Anita make their way to the port, but find Wong and his men waiting for them. A gunfight ensues, Wong is killed and Anita and Ryuichi jump into the watertoescape his men.The last bit of moneythey had leftcomesfloating up as Wong's henchmen fire round after round of ammunition into the water. The scene ends in a wide shot of the port, the sound of gunfire resounding through the air.

From this panoramic wide shot, Miike cuts to a close-up of a pool of blood splashing back and forth, on the bottom of what is revealed to be a rowing boat. Ryuichi and Anita are out in the open sea, and despite bleeding heavily and being stranded in a little wooden sloop, the fact that Miike pulls back from that close-up all the way to a panoramic birds eye view of the wide sea suggests that this couple of outcasts might well find their utopia. When their tiny boat almost seems to disappear in the overwhelming mass of water, the question of whether or not they will make it becomes irrelevant. The course of the little rowing boat is the film's second ley line, the one that leads to that indistinct final destination, and once again we hear Ryuichi singing his song about the railroad that leads to an unknown place. By standing back and letting all concerns fade away, Miike allows him and Anita their happiness, wherever it may lie.

SILVER

1999

Miike's first V-cinema production in two years, Silver was also a renewed partnership with Hisao Maki. It proved to be an unwise decision. Despite the fact that five years had passed since their last collaboration, Maki's abilities as a writer hadn't improved a bit since *Bodyguard Kiba* 3. His vanity on the other hand seemed to have only increased, as witnessed by his being credited as producer, writer (based on his own manga), action director and actor. His reprisal of his trademark cameo as a karate instructor was indicative: by casting himself as the protagonists teacher, he played the only character to rank above the hero.

Its story a typical Maki combination of karate, wrestling and pseudo-espionage, Silver's blatant open ending indicates that it was meant as the first in a series. The fact that no further episodes have since emerged is an indication of the film's qualii. Even for an episode of a series it is clumsily structured, let alone for a feature film.

Suffering from all the symptoms that plagued Miike's earlier Maki adaptations, Silver is a throwback to the days of A Human Murder Weapon, its abject poverty rendered all the more evident by arriving right after Ley Lines. The contrast between the two films is astonishing. Miike seems to have thrown all the progress he made since his early video days overboard in one fell swoop, even going so far as to fall back on the pointlessly excessive use of dolly shots so typical of his formative years.

The premise of the film is as nonsensical as its execution. Former FBI agent Jun Shirogane (played with total lack of both charisma and acting ability by vapid, big-breasted topless model Atsuko Sakuraba) is recruited by her former colleague and ex-lover Minamida (Kenji Haga) into a secret government organisation, which was formed to combat "the increasing chaos at the end of the twentieth century". Minamida used to serve as a policeman under Jun's father, who was killed along with his wife and youngest daughter by a mentally retarded, chainsaw-wielding maniac in the service of the yakuza (the aftermath of this event serves as the film's opening scene, its blood-spattered, masked murderer is a very obvious nod to Tobe Hooper's *The Texas* Chainsaw *Massacre).* At the time of the murders, Jun was taking part in a karate tournament in the United States and the guilt she feels over not having been able to protect her family is what made her decide to become a cop.

After Jun agrees to his offer, Minamida asks her to go undercover as a member of a travelling troupe of female wrestlers, since "wrestlers are always on the road and travel to many different places, so its ideal camouflage for searching out evil elements all over the country".

Jun's first mission is to smash the operations of yakuza-affiliated corporate extortionist Nancy Otori (Keiji Matsuda), who uses her skills as an S/M dominatrix to ensnare corporate executives into her fiendish web by turning them into her personal sex slaves. Her latest victim is bank manager Sasaki (Kôji Tsukamoto), who is delivered to Nancy by the woman's yakuza strongmen and proves to be very responsive to all manners of sexual degradation.

The wrestling troupe travels to Nancy's hometown, where they put on their act for the amusement of the local population. Jun (nicknamed Silver Jun and wearing a skin-tight rubber costume) makes her debut as a professional wrestler in the afternoon, then at night (still wearing the same costume) breaks into the mansion occupied by the crooked dominatrix.

Jun (Atsuko Sakuraba, r.) and Minamida (Kenji Haga) in a tight spot

She stumbles into the middle of Nancy's having her way with Sasaki and begins to beat her up before being captured by the woman's guards and taken to her dungeons. After being the subject of a topless whipping (high-contrast lighting keeps Sakuraba's assets from being completely exposed), Jun frees herself without much effort and escapes. Before long she is picked up by a group of gangsters and brought to Sasaki's office. She beats up the bank manager then goes back to take care of Nancy. Interrupting her during an auto-erotic act involving candle wax, Jun lifts the dominatrix above her head and holds her there for what seems like an eternity, before breaking Nancy's back over her knee with a wrestling move.

With that, the plot has been completed. Indicative of Maki's ill-structured writing, this point arrives after only 53 minutes. How he proceeds to fill the rest of the running time (the film runs a grand total of 79 minutes) is equally symptomatic: an obligatory love scene between

and Minamida (shot in soft focus and slow motion, tedious and completely unerotic), fol-
d by the introduction of a new character who is immediately killed off after serving his
ose in the story. This character (played by Yasukaze Motomiya) is a renegade member
t another top-secret group of government-trained assassins called the Mamushi No Ana
er's hole'). Having stealthily saved Jun from assassination by the yakuza earlier (he killed
junman with several well-placed darts), he hands her a file conveniently containing all
)roof of Nancy's illicit dealings. He saves Jun's life from another sniper in the streets that
t (moments after they thrashed a gang of teenage punks together), but is himself killed
e process. As Jun hidesfrom theassassin's bullets, Minamida suddenly appears on a motor-
to take her to safety. A glimpse of the assailant reveals that she is female and has a
st size to rival Jun's, before the film cuts to the end credits.

Thanks to Maki's downright incapacity to tell a properly structured story that makes at least
e sense, and a director who appears to have temporarily lost all his talent and ability,
er falls short even of the 'so bad it's good' category. Despite its numerous exploitation ele-
nts, the overabundance of expositional dialogue scenes makes the film slow and tedious.
:e it was intended as the pilot of a series, this creates the necessity to firmly establish the
agonist and various supporting characters in order for them to function as flat characters
ubsequent episodes. The result is too much exposition that slows the film down.

Furthermore, Sakuraba's ample chest can't change the fact that she is a completely
id presence who lacks acting ability. To add insult to injury, she has to perform amidst thread-
e production values. With no money for set dressing, Nancy's mansion is empty save for
chairs, a mattress and lots of candles. The special effects are bottom-of-the-barrel, with
very obvious composite shot pasting a group of gleaming office towers against a back-
und of Monument Valley. Shot on video, the film alternates overlit interiors and underlit
-nt time exteriors, bungling such fundamental aspects of camerawork as white balance
rematogrpaher Tanhiko Mitsui previously worked with Miike on the *Oretachi Wa Tenshi*
Nai films).

Ultimately though, a film is the director's responsibility. We've already signalled in
apter 3 how strong the influence of Hisao Maki is on Miike's performance as a director,
d Silver would seem to confirm this. Even five years later, after a string of high-quality
rks, it's a collaboration with Maki that undoes everything that went before and which drags
director back down to the level of a mere novice. But such drastic change wouldn't be
ssible without the director's own will and the fault is as much his as it is Maki's. This does
pear to be the inevitable conclusion of all the Miike-Maki collaborations. Sadly, Silver
uldn't be their fast.

WHITE-COLLAR WORKER KINTARO

Salaryman Kintaro

1999

Coming right after Silver, *White-Collar Worker Kintaro* was another disappointment. While 1999 also gave us two of Miike's best films in the shape of *Ley Lines* and *Dead or Alive*, the throwaway mess Silver and the thoroughly conventional *Kintaro* were two consecutive lows that stood in strong contrast.

As outright commercial in its intentions as *Andromedia*, *White-Collar Worker Kintaro* is different in that it offered its director no themes to explore. What it did offer was a perfunctory intrigue, populated with two-dimensional characters and carrying a moralistic undertone handled with so little subtlety as to become almost laughable.

The white-collar worker of the title is a morally upstanding young *salaryman* fighting corporate crime and corruption. Kintaro (Katsunori Takahashi) was once the leader of a biker gang, but has gone on to become a responsible adult and father. He not only fights corporate wrongdoing but also saves fellow officeworkersfrom being molested by street punks and dives into a burning house to save an infant child where firemen won't risk going into the flames. Instead of a human being, Kintaro is flawless, like Superman who never bothers to change out of Clark Kent's grey suit.

Though perhaps Popeye would a better analogy for this character originating from a manga for teenage boys. Just like Popeye took a weight off many a parents shoulders by teaching children to like spinach, the character of Kintaro could be considered propaganda for the

Kintaro (Katsunori Takahashi, center) gives fatherly advice to his son Ryuta (Tomonosuke Shimada) "Gambare!"

Left: The superman: on his way to work. Kintarô saves a fellow salaryman from the clutches of a street gang.
Right: Kintarô and his layabout boss Mr. Igo (Tsutomu Yamazaki) discover the fraud during the government pitch.

life of an office worker, civil obedience and upstanding moral values. His adventures are infused with the concept of *gambare,* the encouraging expression of perseverance and courage.

But even though the plot stays close to the original manga, it's unlikely that the film had the same aim. With Kintarô's continuous spouting of lines like "Don't underestimate a salaryman" and "Don't abuse our tax money!" there can be little mistake about the film's function as a vicarious fantasy for adult male office workers. Kintarô not only fights for justice and beats up street punks, he has the admiration of his colleagues and his superiors, has several women vying for his attention and is also the loving father of a model son. His only flaw is the fact that he has an ex-wife, the mother of his son Ryuta, but of course their split was an amicable one and they remain good friends.

Meant as a bridge between two seasons of the *Salaryman Kintarô* television series [which the director was not involved with) the film's plot concerns a scheme by rival corporations and a corrupt senator to destroy Kintarô's employer Yamato Construction. When all its c&tracts for public works and government orders are mysteriously cancelled, Yamato is in danger of going bankrupt. Kintarô has just been transferred to the company's small branch in suburban Tôhoku, which is run by the layabout,, undisciplined manager Igo (Tsutomu Yamazaki). Igo's good-for-nothing attitude – he prefers playing mah-jong in a local bar to working – is a thorn in Kintarô's side, but Igo wins the respect of his new recruit when he beats Kintarô in a man-to-man fight.

The two discover that Yamato is being kept from obtaining government orders through a system of blank paper bids. Kintarô unmasks the scheme in front of government officials and competitors, during a pitch for a new contract. The conspirators then call in the help of the yakuza and several days later both Igo and Kintarô's son Ryuta (Tomondsuke Shimada) become the victims of a bomb attack. Although neither of these proves lethal, it's enough reason for Kintarô to go for revenge. He re-unites his old biker gang, who drive in an ever-growing procession to protest against corruption. The police are unable to stop what soon

becomes a convoy of thousands of motorcycles, which attracts widespread media attention. With his friends by his side, Kintarô first wipes out the yakuza, then heads for senator Tanioka's house. There he is intercepted by hundreds of policemen in riot gear who block the entrance to the house and is arrested.

The denouement is constructed in keeping with the film's message of civil obedience snd moral values. While Kintarô is in jail, a big investigation against corruption is undertaken, widely reported in the media which declare Kintarô a hero. All those responsible for the scheme are arrested and Yamato Construction is saved -a resolution obtained through rhe law, not through violence, which also keeps Kintarô's hands clean since the only violence he used was against the yakuza. Kintarô is released from jail a hero, given a suspended sentence so as not to condone his behaviour and deliver the message that one is always responsible for the consequences of one's own actions. Walking out of the courthouse, he is welcomed by a huge crowd of cheering people. "All the Japanese are angry and they support you," mister Yamato himself (Masahiko Tsugawa) tells Kintarô. And as if it wasn't yet sufficiently clear: "In troubled times, people need a hero."

As witnessed by this conclusion, the film severely overstates its messages, driving them home with a complete lack of subtlety on every level: when Kintarô delivers his righteous speeches, he does so in heroic close-up. Characters lack all nuance and are either black or white, with only two exceptions. The civil servant Hanada, who reads out the corroborate bids during the pitch, is ensnared by his superiors to cooperate with the scheme of the blank paper bid. But since he is the father of the child Kintarô saved from the burning house, he is torn between friendship and obligation. He finally chooses the latter and when Kintarô unmasks the scheme, Hanada commits suicide the following morning.This ambivalence is the main reason why the sequence of the blank paper bid is one of the film's more successful scenes.

The other exception is Igo, but instead of his ways rubbing off on Kintarô, it's the other Nay around. In fact it was the intention all along to have Kintarô's presence bring Igo back o his former self, the man he was before he stopped caring about anything but himself. The mplication is that he was just like Kintarô when he was younger but lost sight of his ideals n the course of his life (which gives at least part of the audience another point of identification, supporting the reading that the film is consciously aimed at much older audiences than he manga). Of course, to bring Igo back to his old self also implies bringing him back to conformity, thus also making him a two-dimensional character.

It's not just their lack of depth that hampers the characters. Just like in *Andromedia*, here are problems with motivation and function as well. The entire plot rests on the secret agreement between Yamato's main rival and senator Tanioka. But the rival's motivation for wanting to destroy Yamato Construction is that he "can't hate them enough." The senator's has an equally implausible reason to join the scheme: at a reception for Yamato's anniversary, Kintarô put Tanioka in his place for making indecent proposals to his female friend Misuzu (Yoko Saito).

As a result of being caught in between two seasons of an ongoing television series, quite a few of the characters that appear in the film have no real function beyond carrying on their TV role. The same Misuzu's only role is to set up the confrontation between Kintarô and the senator. One of Kintaro's secret admirers is Misuzu's sister, a pop singer called Mimi (Kanako Inomoto) whose pursuit of the protagonist only functions to emphasise the torch that the

Left: Mr. Yamato (Masahiko Tsugawa, l.), Kintara and Masumi (Michiko Hada) await Ryuta's release from hospital
Right: Kintarô celebrates victory with Ryuta, Masumi and the rest of the country.

salaryman's colleague Masumi (Michiko Hada) carries for him. Finally there is Kintarô's co-worker and nemesis Seiji (Naoki Hosaka) who sits on crucial information about a mole inside Yamato Construction but doesn't reveal it until Kintarô is in jail. The two men's rivalry in the workplace is a recurring feature of the series, but is never even hinted at in the film.

White-Collar Worker ***Kintaro*** carries precious little evidence that Takashi Miike was its director. The film is anonymously shot, as perfunctory on a stylistic level as in its plot and characters, with a narrative that is entirely dialogue-driven. Miike plays around with texture and colours in the scene of the bikers' procession, but this little bit of image manipulation is hardly a replacement for the overall lack of vision in this film. Only two moments show any kind of inspiration on the part of the director, being the scenes of the bomb attacks on Igo and Ryuta. In the first, the blast is preceded by a digital effect that mimics the melting of the film stock. The second scene builds tension very effectively by playing the suspense exactly by the Hitchcock rulebook. But these are two brief scenes drifting in an ocean of conformity. Full testimony of how little of himself Miike added to the film can be found in the portrayal of Kintarô's young son Ryuta, whose unwavering cuteness goes against everything the director established in *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai - Bôkyô.*

Like the film that preceded it, *White-Collar Worker* ***Kintaro*** has no thematic connection to any of Miike's other work. It is a completely conventional work whose perfunctory approach makes it fail even as generic entertainment. Within the context of Miike's oeuvre it is interesting only for the fact that the film's conformist nature was a conscious choice on the part of the director (see chapter 7 for more details). The results however are instantly forgettable.

TENNEN SHÔJO MANN NEXT

1999

The idol system, producing all-purpose young entertainment talent with conveyor belt efficiency, is known for the disposability of its product. Stars rise, fall and fade into obscurity before reaching their twenties. This follow-up to Tennen *Shôjo* Mann offers a very extreme example, since the entire cast of the first series has been replaced by a new set of fresh young faces. If Tennen *Shôjo* Mann Next is anything to go by, the shelf life of the average idol is a shockingly brief ten months.

The new cast is only one of the many changes that have been made in comparison to the first series, the results of which have unfortunately not been to its advantage: **Tennen *Shôjo Mann*** Next lacks the freshness and spontaneity of its precursor. Ayana Sakai, who takes over the title role from Jun Matsuda, doesn't have her predecessor's charisma, while Chiaki Ichiba as Mann's former rival Riona lacks Runa Nagai's mischievous aura. Ichiba's deep tan, dyed hair and whiny voice make her come off as little more than a spoilt fashion victim instead of the commanding personality the part demands. In the small role of Mann's friend Yukari, Chikako Oba fails to impress where Yuki Matsuoka brought a lively energy in the first series. Several performances border on hammy, particularly that of Erika Yamakawa as Riona's closest friend Chiaki, who here serves largely as mere comic relief, removing all the ambiguity that existed in the relationship between her and Riona in the first season of Tennen *Shôjo* Mann.

It's not merely the changes in cast that make the characters come off as less lively, it's also the result of the more focused plot. While this certainly has its advantages, which we'll go into later, it also creates a lot less space for the characters to manoeuvre and present themselves. While at least half of the dozen or so characters have little to do beyond simply filling the frame, the lead characters lack dimension, also because the script does little with properly establishing them since the first series already served that purpose. For the character of Mann for instance, the combination of this simplified script, a less charismatic actress plus an increased uniformity in the costumes results in a loss of individuality. She's a more anonymous presence, on an equal level with all her friends where she should instead be exceptional.

This increased anonymity is also reflected in the change of locale. In another drastic alteration, the story has been relocated from the very specific setting of Tokyo's Shibuya and Harajuku districts to the indistinctive cityscape of Yokohama. Since Shibuya is the vibrant center of Japan's teen culture, this effectively means that the characters are taken out of their natural environment and that the complementary relationship between characters and setting is lost. The new environment is furthermore desperately short of atmosphere. Shibuya's cracked, narrow streets have been replaced by the shiny, clean and above all empty structures of Yokohama. Aside from its scenic seaside and distinctive skyline, the city lacks character and all too often the backgrounds consist of slabs of dull, greyconcrete. The increased use of sets for the interiors results in an equal loss of character and atmosphere.

Finally there is the upgrade from digital video to Betacam, which certainly adds production value, but also makes the shots more static. Gone are the dynamic handheld shots

hat manoeuvred with the characters through the dense crowds. Now the camera keeps a respectful distance in exteriors and street scenes, observing instead of participating.

Since all these changes directly affect the spontaneity and tone, they suck much of he life out of the series. The sheer number of unnecessary, unfavourable alterations comes across as an excuse to not have to call this a sequel, like a strained attempt to set the second season apart from its predecessor. Some compromises seem to have been made to nake sure fans of the first series don't feel cheated, particularly in the first 15 minutes which are full of scenes that directly reference moments from series one. But these attempts at emulation only make the problems more apparent. We only need to compare these scenes vith their original version to notice the adverse effects of the changes. A scene of schoolgirls chatting in a carefully lit set of a cafe doesn't have half the atmosphere of the same scene shot in an actual fast food restaurant in Shibuya, with a view of the crowded streets hrough the windows.

Not all the effects of the changes are negative however. The tighter plot liberates it rom the lengthy dialogue scenes that slowed down the third episode of the first series. Tennen Shôjo Mann *Next* doesn't even have a third episode, and its two feature-length parts 72 and 88 minutes respectively) play even more like a single long film than its precursor. And while the simplification of the story has eradicated the theme of the schoolgirl as outcast (the elements of harassment and bullying feature only in passing), it has brought it nstead closer to the theme of physiological rootlessness as previously explored in Full *Metal Gokudô* and *Andromedia.* In a radical break with the manga story it's based on, *Tennen Shôjo Mann Next* pits Mann and her friends against a group of vampires, who hide behind he front of a modelling agency to find nubile young necks to bite into. Although the transfornation motif of the vampire is a long-standing one, it nevertheless fits in with Miike's theme if physiological rootlessness, particularly when Mann falls in love with a young vampire named Yuya (Takashi Nagayama) and the pair are torn between their love for each other and the loyalty to their groups.

The combination of vampires, models and schoolgirls, however far-fetched it may seem, allows the director to offer some effective thoughts on the fragility and the transitory nature of youth and beauty. The agency's top vampiric model Maria (played with a suitably untouchable aura by real-life model Shiori), who is admired by all the schoolgirls in Yokohama, suffers from a cancer-like disease that causes her to vomit up blood. She desperately tries o hide this from others to preserve her image, but when she falls to her knees and convulses in the middle of a photo shoot surrounded by teenage onlookers, her career is over. Her beauty and then her life follow suit: she starts to deteriorate and age rapidly, and as her hair starts to fall out she becomes the opposite of the gorgeous model she used to be. (Miike sets her stumble through the streets in this state, repeating the scene of the battered Anita imping through Kabukichô in *Ley Lines* and delivering the one moment in *Tennen Shôjo Mann* Next that surpasses its predecessor.)

But *Tennen Shôjo Mann Next*'s most obvious virtue are its visuals. The use of Beta nstead of DV may have come at the expense of the spontaneity, the fact that Hideo Yamamoto has taken position behind the camera has had obvious benefits. Visually the second series s often striking, particularly in its use of colour, which is as bold as anything Miike has previously undertaken with Naosuke Imaizumi. Although the style here is purely aesthetic, serving to create a mood instead of having a narrative function like in for instance *Ley Lines,* the

results are often beautiful, not only in the use and combination of colours but also in compositions and a variety of almost surrealist touches. In the opening scene, Mann sits on a swing with a nighttime view of Yokohama's skyline. The swing's ropes are vines covered in roses and the sky is an almost fluorescent green. Then behind her the headlights of a dozen motorcycles pierce the darkness. In another scene, the lead vampire spreads his giant bat wings, causing the room to colour red as a result of the light shining through the thin leathery tissue of the wings. The scene of Maria's death on a beach is lit green, but with an intensely azure sky.

It's in its visuals that *Tennen Shôjo* Mann Next has its biggest value within Miike's oeuvre, since its aesthetic directly influenced the style of his next foray into television with *MPD-Psycho*.

DEAD OR ALIVE

Dead or Alive – Hanzaisha

1999

After three disappointments in a row, Dead or *Alive* was a very convincing return to form. Harking back to the themes in *Shinjuku Triad Society* and *Ley Lines*, this film is Miike's most overt statement on ethnic and cultural rootlessness, once again represented by the zanryu koji who here appear in the shape of a gang of criminals muscling in on yakuza territory.

The film is not only a resounding success on a thematic level (it's as much an example of how the director's various themes work together as *Ley Lines* was), but also in the way of style. Compared to his previous works, the director makes giant strides in his employment of exaggeration (taking it to the level of metaphor) and juxtaposition (which functions here as the blueprint for the film's structure), and perfects his trademark montages.

This last point becomes apparent from the word go, since *Dead* or *Alive* opens with exactly such a tableau of images. In *Shinjuku* ***Outlaw*** the montage served to condense the narrative, in *Shinjuku Triad* ***Society*** it set tone and atmosphere, and in *Blues Harp* it established one of its characters. In *Dead* or *Alive* it does all those things at once. Furthermore, vhereas the montage in *Blues Harp* carried a certain amount of excess baggage, this is entirely absent from *Dead* or *Alive*, whose opening is more focused in its choice of sequences and nages. There are no flash forwards, no 'scratching' to later highlights. The montage here is an entirely cohesive narrative component.

By way of its three functions, lets examine how Dead or Alive's opening montage works:

- **Setting tone and atmosphere:** a blast of colour (neon lights, characters' costumes, blood) set to a driving electric guitar score, the sequence shows a naked woman plummeting to her death from a rooftop, a man snorting a line of cocaine several meters long, a drug dealer receiving a knife in the jugular while sodomizing another man in a public toilet, strippers and hookers at work, policemen molesting two teenage girls while several blocks away two criminals shoot up a Chinese restaurant and kill one of its customers (a shot in the back causes the contents of his recently filled stomach to splatter over the camera) – as in *Shinjuku Triad Society*, the opening minutes sees the director employ exaggeration to establish a world completely off-kilter. Like most of the film, the opening sequence is set in Kabukichô, which once again functions as a place of myth. Even more so than in *Shinjuku Triad Society* in fact, since the black society portrayed here is no longer hidden but out in the open. It has moved out of the alleys and onto the main thoroughfares, where a man strolls through the crowd holding a shotgun, climbs onto a car waiting in traffic and blasts a hail of bullets through the roof to kill the passenger in the back seat (Ren Ôsugi in a role confined to the opening minutes). Again, such sequences are shot wild in the streets and the absence of crowd control lends the myth a striking touch of authenticity.
- **Condensing the narrative:** far from a random collection of images, the sequences that make up the montage most definitely tell a story. In fact, in *Dead or Alive*'s original screenplay (by *Ley Lines*' Ichirô Ryu) they were written as entire scenes, complete

with dialogue. Miike reduced the lines of dialogue to two, containing a total of seven words, two of which are nearly inaudibly buried beneath other sound effects. All other information in the eight-minute montage is given visually, yet it tells five short stories, each of which has a beginning, middle and end within the span of the montage: three separate assassinations, the yakuza receiving news of these deaths and the culprits gathering in the same location to show that the murders are connected.

- **Establishing characters:** the purpose of the two lines of dialogue mentioned above is to establish the names of two of the characters. One of these is the film's cop protagonist Jojima (Show Aikawa) and the fact that he is called by his name numerous times throughout the film is most likely the reason why the line establishing his name is almost inaudible.The other is Chang Feng, the victim of the assassination in the restaurant. When Jojimaarrives on the crime scene and identifies him through the half-digested noodles scattered across the floor, we learn both the character's name and the fact that he is Chinese.The nametag carried by Ren Ôsugi's character has the same function. When we read his name 'Yan', again we know not only his name but also that he is Chinese. For both characters the establishing of the name is important, since they are mentioned in a later scene that puts their deaths into context within the plot. The third murder victim, the drug dealer knifed in the toilet, is not given a name and this fact seen in the context of the other two characters automatically indicates that he is therefore Japanese.

  Aside from the above three characters, two other parties are introduced in the montage. First, the two leaders of the ruling yakuza faction. Their positions as top figures in organised crime are sufficiently clear from their conduct, costumes and the fact that they are given royalty treatment at a strip club. Second, there are the four men responsible for the assassinations.The final scene of the montage sees them assemble at the same strip club the two yakuza just left (after receiving news of the assassinations by way of a phone call). The fact that the four killers, plus the club's stripper, belong to the same group is established by having them all partake in a knife-throwing act on the club's stage: one throws the knives (dressed as a clown, with make-up applied backstage by the stripper), the second spins the target, onto which is strapped the third. When the knives are thrown and the target stops spinning, the third has been replaced by the fourth.

  The placing of each character in this line-up is intentional and comments on their function. The stripper's (Mizuho Kôga) task is less active than that of the men; the man who throws the knives (Hitoshi Ozawa) also used a blade during the murder of the drug dealer in the toilet; the second and third (Kyôsuke Yabe and Yoshiyuki Yamaguchi) are partnered in both this performance and previously in the shooting of Chang Feng, thus revealing they share a camaraderie; finally, from the fact that he is introduced last – his close-up is the final shot of the montage-we learn that the man (Riki Takeuchi) who killed Yan is the leader of this small band of criminals.

The montage has another function: it throws us in at the deep end, starting the film off in the final stage of Miike's process of themes. Contrary to the structure of Ley *Lines, Dead or Alive* takes a top-down approach to this process, immersing the viewer in violence first, then moving down to the group unit, followed by the other stages.

These other stages - childhood, the position of the outcast and rootlessness -are all established in a single scene that follows almost immediately after the montage. It's revealed that Ryuichi, the leader of the gang, has a teenage brother called Tōji (Michisuke Kashiwaya) who he sent to the United States to study. When Tōji returns (complete with skateboard, baseball shirt and Converse sneakers), his first wish is to visit their mothers grave, which is revealed to be in a desolate swamp somewhere on the edge of town. When we hear Tōji talk to her tombstone in heavily accented Chinese, we learn that the brothers and the rest of the gang are *zanryu koji,* while the location of the cemetery makes it clear that they are forced to dwell on the fringes of society as a result. Moments after Tōji finishes his prayers, the other four members of the group arrive to throw the young man a welcome party, establishing the bond and camaraderie between these people of shared fate.

This solidarity is immediately contrasted with the home life of policeman Jojima, whose pragmatic nature and devotion to his work have alienated him from his wife and daughter[15]. His wife keeps up appearances, going only so far in her complaints as to ask her husband to stop sleeping on the couch when he returns home late. Jojima's daughter on the other hand is less forgiving of the lack of attention and she snubs him completely. Her anger is also affected by her heart condition, an illness for which Jojima can't afford to pay the operation. His wife suggests asking her parents for help, but Jojima refuses, saying he will "figure something out".

This scene is an example of the juxtaposition Miike employs throughout the film. He continually contrasts the lives of Ryuichi on the one hand and Jojima on the other. This is not simply a matter of first showing one, then the other. In the process of the film the developments their lives go through are always on opposite ends of the spectrum: Ryuichi starts the film within a harmonious unit, but his position gradually worsens. Jojima on the other hand is a man with a divided family that slowly grows closer as the film progresses. In that process there must inevitably be a halfway point in which the two are equal. Not surprisingly, Miike chooses that moment to have the two men meet face to face. When they are on an equal level, it is impossible to create juxtaposition due to the absence of contrast.

The use of juxtaposition is not only limited to the contrasting of Jojimaand Ryuichi. Within Jojima's life there is a similar contrast between his home life and his work. Following the scene in his home, we see Jojima at work and realise that he is much more in his element on the streets of Kabukichh He gets along better with his informant, a man who makes animal pornography (Dankan), and with the yakuza than with his wife and daughter. Although he is never shown as being corrupt, Jojima is more concerned with maintaining the status quo for the ruling yakuza clan than with getting rid of organised crime (making him another variation on the character of Tagami from *Shinjuku Outlaw*). As such, it's of little concern to him that yakuza leader Sakurai (played by film critic and long-time Miike supporter Tokitoshi Shiota) and his lieutenant Aoki (Renji Ishibashi) -the two top gangsters seen in the opening montage-are in talks with Chinese triads about establishing a new dope route between mainland China and Japan, after the murders of their existing contacts Yan and Chang Feng. It's the assassins that have Jojima's attention.

These assassins' next action is the robbery of an armoured transport. They make off with three big cases of money, but instead of making their situation more comfortable, the heist proves to be the beginning of the end for the group. The problems that result from it are twofold. First, Hitoshi (Yabe) runs off with one of the cases, sneaking off into the subway

behind his partners, who don't realise he's gone until they reach the car. Waiting inside the car are Mariko, the stripper, and Tôji, who is shocked to find that his brother and friends are bank robbers and that such ill-gotten gains paid for his studies abroad (The wide-eyed innocence of Kashiwaya's character here is very similar to his role in Ley *Lines).*

Hitoshi takes the *money* back to his mother, hoping to flee to China and return to the homeland like his mother always wished. But she declines, saying she's planning to go to a hot spring resort with friends instead. (This scene is an indication that the characters' Chinese heritage means more to the young than to the old. An earlier example of this was given with Tôji's prayers at his mother's grave, during which Ryuichi waited impatiently at a distance with his back turned.) Leaving the money with his mother, he departs to find his friends waiting for him outside (the entire group, including Tôji). He denies that he betrayed them, saying he only borrowed the money to help his mother. When he tries to run off, Ryuichi shoots him.

Hitoshi's betrayal signals the first crack in the group's unity. The characters themselves are aware how important it is for them to stick together, hence their decision to meet Hitoshi together. But the fact that he betrayed them makes the rupture unavoidable. Even though Ryuichi punishes him for it, that punishment itself, being death, is akin to rupture, since either way they lose Hitoshi and the group ends up being damaged. (The film doesn't show whether the group gets the money back from Hitoshi's mother, suggesting that their friends betrayal is more important to them than the cash.)

Jojima seems at that point stilt far away from reuniting his family. His wife finds him sleeping on the couch again and keeps asking him how they're going to obtain the 20 million yen needed for their daughters operation. When the phone rings, she picks it up and hearing the callers voice stealthily heads into the hallway so as not to be overheard by her husband. When she whispers "I told you not to call me here" into the receiver, Jojima realises his wife is cheating on him. His reaction is to go back to sleep on the couch, which would seem to indicate he doesn't care, but the expression on his face says otherwise. It's an acceptance and with that a forgiveness – a realisation that it can only have been his own behaviour that drove his wife to do this. His silence is in fact the first step towards reconciliation.

The next day Jojima's informant tells him about the creation of a new drug route through Yokohama. With the address of a local snitch, Jojima heads to Yokohama, ordering his partner Inoue (Susumu Terajima) to meet him there, despite it being his colleague's day off. When they meet, it turns out Inoue has brought his five-year old son along, the result of having to interrupt his free day. The local informant is a cook (Far-Long Oh) in a restaurant in the city's Chinatown, who gives Jojima and Inoue their first information on "Ryu, a newcomer from Kaohsiung who is planning big things." (This exchange of info is done over a copious Chinese meal the cook made them, and the presence of the little boy works as a contrast to the men's talk of drug routes and murder.)

On their way back, Jojima, Inoue and the boy pass Ryuichi and his brother Tôji in the streets. Neither of the two men knows the other's face yet and to both parties the others are simply passers-by. This scene is not the face-to-face mentioned before, which is to come later, but it does serve as the intro to it. Like the chance meeting between Show Aikawa's and Naoto Takenaka's characters in Ley Lines, Jojima and Ryuichi's unknowing encounter establishes a spatial link between the men which functions as an introduction to the confrontation that's to come.

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In the meantime, the disintegration of Ryuichi's group that started with Hitoshi's betrayal continues when Tôji voices his shock over his brother's cold-blooded murder of their friend. With the discovery of Ryuichi's criminal practices still fresh, the young man can't forgive him for Hitoshi's death. An argument ensues and after Ryuichi hits his little brother, Tôji runs away, bringing about the next step in the collapse of the group.

Ryuichi continues alone to his destination: a meeting with the man who can set up his drug shipments from Taiwan. This kind of scene would be an obligatory, routine occurrence in a film of this type. Here it is turned into something quite memorable. Miike introduces several new elements that, without fundamentally changing the gist of the scene, do keep it from becoming standard. First he changes the setting, having what would normally happen in an office take place inside the hull of an empty freight ship. Secondly, he introduces a third character, a rival client. With the intent of testing their worth, the intermediary has Ryuichi and his rival play a game of Russian roulette. The winner gets the business. This method of embellishing otherwise routine moments is also a preferred method of Miike's in portraying peripheral characters that would otherwise leave little or no impression on the viewer. He previously used this technique in *Jingi Naki Yabô* 2, but would perfect its function in The *City of* Lost Souls. Anotherexample is Jojima's chief, who spends his days on the roof of the station spouting philosophy and carving wooden flutes.

There is another example of this method in the film. As Jojima's quest for Ryuichi continues, he and Inoue go past the places where the criminal grew up, armed with the information about his background they received in Yokohama. They question two men who proclaim Ryuichi their hero. They too are *zanryu koji,* as they put it: "We look Japanese, but we're not. Then again, we look Chinese but we're not. We're really not anything." One of these two characters is played by Tomorowo Taguchi, wearing exactly the same costume as his character in Ley *Lines.* He is nevertheless nearly unrecognisable due to the big afro wig he wears on his head.

Good-natured clowning aside, the scene does contain one of the most overt statements on the *zanryu koji* as outcasts yet heard in a Miike film. It's not the only assertion of its kind in the film. In a scene soon thereafter, which finally sees the two men coming face to face, Ryuichi finds himself sitting opposite Jojima in the interrogation room, the result of the cop receiving photos of his target from his informant. There is little of practical use that Jojima gets out of the gangster, who instead exclaims: "Unlike you, this country has done nothing for me."

With the disintegration of Ryuichi's group already set in motion, other victims inevitably fall. At his insistence, Mariko takes a job in a hostess club in order to spy on the yakuza. In the scene in which he asks her this favour, we learn that Mariko and Ryuichi were once a couple planning to have a baby. When Mariko reminds him of this, he walks away without saying a word, suggesting that the bonds within the group are not as strong as they may at first have seemed. It also shines new light on the death of Hitoshi and the departure of Tôji, both of which were the result of Ryuichi's behaviour, as well as drawing a parallel with the unemotional pragmatism of Jojima (which appropriately happens at the moment in the story when the two men are on the same level).

Mariko's first client is none other than Aoki. He takes the girl home with him, where we later find him sitting in a chair, high on heroin, with Mariko at his feet in an inflatable pool filled to the brim with the girl's own liquid excrement. Aoki delivers a soliloquy that reveals

he had her shot up with smack, gang-raped, given an enema and finally immersed in her own excrement, all as a result of the diminutive size of his own penis. Which means that everything he did to her was an attempt to compensate for not being able to fuck her. At the heart of his violence lies his own failure as a man, reminiscent of the traumas of Keisuke in *Full Metal Gokudô*. The comparison with that film is also useful in analysing this particular scene, specifically with regards to the function of Aoki's monologue. What it does is avoid the need to show the acts he describes, which keeps this from becoming the kind of gang rape / murder scene that was present in *Full* Metal *Gokudô*. Although it was noted that that particular scene had its function in defining the film's characters, in this instance in *Dead or Alive* this kind of sequence would have had no such purpose, since the aftermath already speaks volumes.

When the condition of Jojima's daughter worsens and immediate surgery is called for, Jojima turns to Aoki and asks the gangster to loan him the 20 million, threatening to arrest him if he doesn't agree. Around the same time, Ryuichi finds Mariko's corpse dumped in an alley. The three remaining members of the group cremate her on a rooftop, after which Ryuichi tries to reconcile his differences with Tôji. Looking him up at his university, their conversation again ends in an argument after the young man states that: "In the USA, not all minorities are gang members. Even in the ghetto you can get a chance to study." Ryuichi walks off, but stops and turns around for a moment, The look the two brothers exchange makes it clear that they both regret the situation (in an interesting detail, their conversation takes place around the university sports field during a rugby match – a setting reminiscent of a similar scene in *Kenka* No *Hanamichi* as well as a reference to Miike's own youth). Again employing a direct juxtaposition, Miike next shows Jojima taking his wife and daughter out to a restaurant to celebrate her imminent surgery.

Despite the fact that they are only three, Ryuichi and his gang move full steam ahead with their plans to take over Shinjuku's streets. They blast their way into the birthday party thrown by the yakuza for the leader of their Chinese triad partners (Shingo Tsurumi). A gathering of all the key figures from both sides, for Ryuichi it forms the ideal opportunity to get rid of everyone in power. A massacre ensues and the three manage to wipe out every gangster in the room, as well as one of Jojima's corrupt colleagues (Hirotarô Honda, who is killed in another of Miike's kitchen jokes: stumbling back from being held at gunpoint, he accidentally puts his hand in consecutively a bowl of egg yolk, a bowl of flour, a bowl of breadcrumbs and finally in hot oil, winding up with a deep-fried hand before being shot).

The last opponent standing is the triad leader, who attacks Ryuichi with the sword he received as a birthday present from Sakurai. Just before he's able to strike, a bullet pierces his chest and he falls dead to the floor. The person who pulled the trigger is Tôji, who arrived with the intention of getting closer to his brother. Words, which are part of Tôji's world, failed to reconcile them, so he attempts to do it by picking up a gun, thus stepping into his brothers world. This embracing of violence marks the end of his childhood and Tôji's first contact with violence swiftly results in his own death when Inoue shows up at the door. Unable to wait for his partner, the cop tries to arrest the gang by himself. With three armed men – including Tôji – opposite him, Inoue doesn't stand a chance and he is riddled with bullets before he can even fire a single shot. As he falls, his gun goes off and the bullet lands in Tôji's chest, which is revealed very slowly as the camera pulls back to expose the red stain on the young man's white shirt. This colour pattern emphasises the tarnished innocence that Tôji becomes

by picking up a gun and the contrast makes his death infinitely more impressive than that of the dozens of corpses scattered around the room (the chaotic structure of the massacre, achieved through handheld cameraworkand editing, was therefore fully intentional, functioning as a counterpoint to the subsequent shooting of Tôji).

By the time Jojima arrives on the scene, the culprits have fled. It seems he's found a room full of corpses, including that of his partner, until Aoki suddenly stands up, having survived the gun battle by playing possum. With a smile on his face, the gangster observes that since everyone is dead, he is now the boss. He immediately offers Jojima a job and tells him that his debt has been erased. As thanks, Jojima shoots him, thus wiping out all existence of the loan and liberating himself from the last obstacle in his private life.

By contrast, things couldn't be worse for Ryuichi. After he buries his brother in theswamp, he sees his first shipment of drugs intercepted by Jojima (in another example of the director embellishing a routine scene, the shipment is transported on a banana boat. The deck is covered in banana peels, as the crew clearly have been eating the fruits since their departure from Taiwan. As they arrive in the harbour, they are vomiting them right back up again). After the death of his brother, business is all that Ryuichi has left and Jojima screws it up for him. With everything taken away, all that remains is his battle with Jojima.

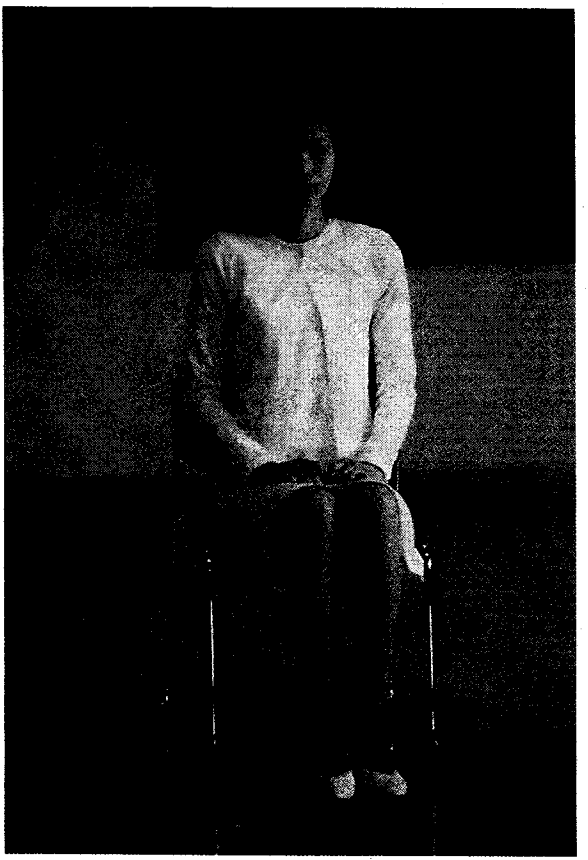
Again this development in Ryuichi is juxtaposed with the life of Jojima, which at that moment is looking rosier than it has during the entire film. His wife and daughter come to the police station to borrow Jojima's car, in order to drive to the hospital for the girl's surgery. He lends them the keys, but the moment his wife starts the car, it explodes, courtesy of Ryuichi's car bomb. Just when things were finally looking up, Jojima too finds everything taken away from him (like with Ryuichi at the start of the film, the possession of a large sum of money, in this case Aoki's loan, is no more than a temporary illusion of happiness). Then, Jojima also has nothing left but his battle with Ryuichi, which finally puts the two men in the same position and sets the scene for the final confrontation.

Driving across a country road, Ryuichi and his remaining two friends stop when they spot Jojima waiting for them in the distance. Seeing the cop, Ryuichi utters: 'This is the final scene." This is not so much a self-referential, meta-narrative wink as an acknowledgement by the character that all that's left for him is the clash with his nemesis. It also echoes the words Jojima spoke to him at the end of the interrogation: "I'll get you in the end." Clearly, the end is nigh.

Forthefinaleof his film, Miikepullsout one moretrick.Again relatedtotheembellishment of a routine scene, he exaggerates this climactic skirmish to the point of turning it into metaphor (complemented by a switch in colour tone to emphasise the exaggeration, reminiscent of the visual change in *The Bird People in China,* also lensed by Hideo Yamamoto). Written as a simple shoot-out in the original script, at its most basic level the scene is about two men who have nothing left in life but their wish to destroy each other. Everything that happens in the climax, exaggerated and unreal as it may be, is essentially metaphor for the characters' determination. With nothing left to lose, they are prepared to go to the very end and beyond to destroy each other. Car crashes, knives, bullets and explosions don't kill them, they only serve to rid the scene of its superfluous elements (i.e. Ryuichi's two accomplices, who both die trying to kill Jojima). When their choice of weapons goes into the realm of the fantastical, the scene still stays admirably true to its intentions and the metaphoric approach is still intact. Even when in the final shot planet earth itself explodes, it fits in. After

all, for each of these two characters the destruction of the other was their entire world. And when they go, naturally that world goes with them.

While the execution of the final scene in its own right is flawless (using the same technique as the finales of *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Chikemuri Junjô Hen* and *Rainy Dog*), it should be regarded as part of a bigger picture, not as a separate entity. And its extremes are rather a contrast to what went before, unlike the opening montage which differed only in pacing and not in tone. The climax of *Dead or Alive* is – though a remarkable piece of cinematic invention, let that be said – stylistically out of tune with the rest of the film, ironically making the film's most eyecatching and astonishing moment also its one weakness.



All eyes are on Asami (Eihi Shiina) during her audition

AUDITION

2000

1999 and 2000 were crucial years for Takashi Miike, who saw his international reputation definitely established as a result of more festival screenings than ever before. Again Canada led the pack, with the '99 editions of the Vancouver and FantAsia festivals both showing his work, followed by the Tokyo film festival and its fantasy-oriented spin-off. Later that year, the director received his first ever retrospective at the Noir In Festival in Courmayeur, Italy[16]. But it wasn't until the Rotterdam film festival in Holland programmed *Ley Lines, Dead or Alive* and *Audition* in early 2000 that Miike's reputation took off proper.

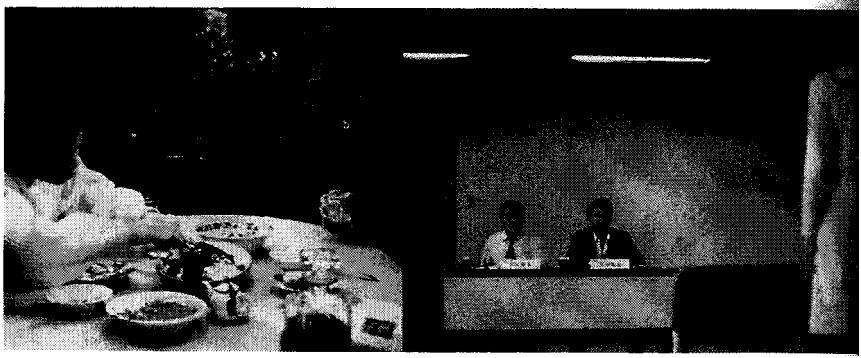
Audition was the film that turned heads at most of these festivals, winning prizes from juries of local and international critics in Rotterdam and going on to be the first of his works released theatrically overseas. Still an unknown in many corners of the globe, Miike was hailed as an overnight sensation. Outside Japan, few people were aware that *Audition* was his 35th film in nine years.

The film's international exposure resulted in a plethora of interpretations on its meaning and intentions. Based on a novel by Ryû Murakami and scripted by Shôhei Imamura's son Daisuke Tengan, its story of a widower whose choice for a new bride turns out to be a psychotic murderess was read as being both feminist *and* misogynist, while the switch in tone in the final quarter was at once acclaimed for topping off the carefully built-up tension as well as dismissed as purely exploitational.

What *Audition* is, is a character study of two lonely souls searching for happiness. Two people who represent the principle that one human being can never truly know or understand another. Focusing on the male half of the pair, Miike employs sexism as the main tool through which to illustrate this principle, but the film offers many different examples of such misunderstandings.

By making his protagonist Aoyama (Ryô Ishibashi) awidower, Miike creates if not exactly a rootless character, then at least an outsider. Despite having a close bond with his adolescent son Shigehiko (Tetsu Sawaki) and running a successful video production company, Aoyama has been a lonely man from the moment his wife Ryôko died. His only romantic entanglement in the seven years that have passed since her death has been a one-night stand with his secretary, ironically the result of his attempt to isolate himself through a devotion to work. The image of womanhood given by his housekeeper Rie is completely sexless: she wears shapeless dungarees that hide any female curves she may possess, never wears make-up and can't cook. When he and Shigehiko eat sea bream for dinner (they caught the fish themselves, which functions as an analogy to both men's search for the opposite sex), the young man tells him this type of fish are all born male but some become female as they grow bigger. Aoyama asks him if this specimen is male or female, to which Shigehiko replies that they could clearly see the ovaries when they cut it open. "I don't know much about ovaries: Aoyama says, establishing the first of many misunderstandings the men in this film have about the opposite sex.

After seven years of hiding, Aoyama is forced to confront his own loneliness when his son tells him that he's starting to look old and he should think about remarrying. The next



Left: Home life: Shigehiko (Tetsu Sawaki) teaches his father about recognising female trout
Right: The audition begins.

day at work, a colleague tells him Japan is full of lonely people. "You too?" he adds, turning to Aoyama. Later that day, his secretary tells him she's getting married. From the fact that the camera lingers on her wordless stare we can tell she obviously still has feelings for her boss, feelings which Aoyama has no interest in returning.

That night he meets up with his film producer friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura) in a bar and states his desire to find a new wife. Aoyama at first sums up a list of criteria that she needs to meet, but when Yoshikawa remarks that those criteria exactly describe his late wife, he says that above all he doesn't want his new marriage to fail. Too old to play the field, he wishes he could have the opportunity to see many women at once and choose one of them. Despite Yoshikawa's belief that "Japan is finished" because there are no more good women (a statement brought on by a group of women giggling loudly in a corner), he hands his friend the solution: to hold an audition. Using an old script written by Aoyama, the two men will audition actresses for the lead role in a non-existent film and Aoyama can take his pick (from the losers, Yoshikawa adds, because the one who gets the part would never be the marrying type).

Leafing through the piles of applications from young, talented and beautiful women a few nights later, Aoyama is clearly enthusiastic, but hesitant at the same time. The impersonal nature of the method he has chosen bothers him, and he voices this concern over the phone to his friend, comparing the selection process to buying a car. His mix of enthusiasm and guilt is again illustrated when he covers up the applications the moment his son enters his study, like an adolescent caught reading dirty magazines. To be looking for a woman makes Aoyama feel like a teenager again, but at the same time the method makes him feel like he's doing something wrong.

This is an indication of the nuance in the character of Aoyama. Yoshikawa on the other hand is something of a male chauvinist and. as his remark about the woman in the bar suggested, deeply pessimistic about love and relationships (though this in turn might suggest

he too is one of Japan's lonely people, lonely to the point of disillusioned). Yoshikawa's character serves to emphasise the nuances in Aoyama and throughout the film, his suggestions and advice always go against Aoyama's instinct and beliefs.

Despite his discomfort, Aoyama does find his candidate among the many applicants. When he spills coffee on one of the papers, he pulls it out from under the pile to clean and his eye is immediately caught by the girl's photograph. Though some reviewers commented on the use of such an obvious device as spin coffee, it is entirely functional in that it speeds up the scene. Aoyama would have stumbled upon the girls application eventually if he had simply gone through all the applications one by one, but this would have taken far too much time and would furthermore have been very undramatic. Additionally, the coincidental nature of the discovery functions in much the same way as Miike's use of the spatial link in Ley Lines and Dead or Alive. in which two characters who by chance share the same space eventually wind up in conflict.

The girl, 24-year old Asami Yamasaki (Eihi Shiina), added a cover letter to her application stating that she was a ballerina until she injured her hip in an accident. Being forced to give up ballet, she writes, was like facing death. The letter deeply touches Aoyama and he is immediately smitten. As a result, the audition itself becomes a pointless experience for him. The way the audition scene is shot emphasises this, in addition to underlining the impersonal, almost mechanical nature of the proceedings. It starts with a shot of a single chair in an empty space, while behind it metal shutters are drawn over the windows. blocking much of the daylight from entering. The two men sit opposite it behind a desk and nearly each shot in the scene emphasises the position of the chair in relation to the room or to the desk. Aoyama confesses he feels like a criminal, but Yoshikawa enters into it with relish, firing off impertinent questions about sensitive subjects like family, sexual habits, drug use and prostitution to the applicants.

Thirty candidates are scheduled to pass their inspection, and Asami is number 28. As mentioned above, Aoyama has already made his choice, which makes listening to the other candidates an obligation. The scene is edited from Aoyama's point of view, empathising with his feelings. Taking the shape of a montage, the audiiin scene shows us bits and pieces of each candidate's interview, all of them moments that are in some way remarkable, be they funny, tragic, emotional or plain ridiculous. This mirrors Aoyama's state of mind, since he too only picks up the memorable moments from this process, which he otherwise sits through absent-mindedly (the use of fast-forwarded video footage of the interviews furthermore expresses his desire to get things over with and meet Asami).

This rhythm stops abruptly when Asami's turn is finally up. Entering the room dressed all in white, her appearance makes quite an impression (all the more because she's framed in a wide shot that makes her look very frail within the environment of the spacious room). Aoyama too is struck by her presence, as is shown by a slow, uninterrupted dolly which moves from a very wide shot of Asami siting in front of the two men to a medium close-up of a stunned Aoyama. For the first time during the entire audition, Aoyama speaks and when he does, his words don't stop coming -as if they had been bottled up inside him from the moment he read her letter. Although his words are sincere, their unrelenting stream again emphasises how much Aoyama is like an insecure teenager, accentuated all the more by the priceless look of stupefaction on Yoshikawa's face. After the audition is over, Yoshikawa expresses his unease over the young woman. Aoyama has an entirely different impression

Left: Asami awaits Aoyama's phone call, with the mysterious bag in the background.
Right: In a dream, Aoyama sees his late wife (Miyuki Matsuda) disappearing behind a tree.

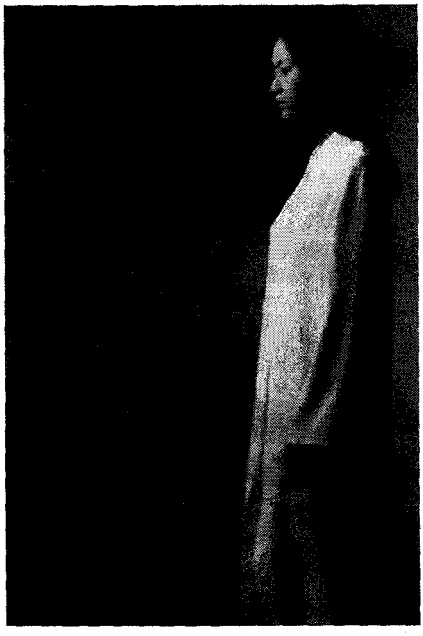
and he walks over to the empty chair to look at the desk from her point of view. thus expressing concern over how he came across in her eyes.

Aoyama's enthusiasm is not only due to the impression Asami makes. The night before the audition, Shigehiko brought home a girl he met on the train, thus setting up a situation in which the son surpasses the father. As noted earlier, Aoyama's actions are in large part influenced by occurrences around him. These and his own enthusiasm over Asami make him step over the doubts he feels about his chosen method, especially once the audition is behind him. The same night he calls up Asami and asks her to go out for a drink. In this instance, so briefly after the audition, Asami's agreement is in partthereSultof Aoyama's power as a producer. She wouldn't say no for fear of endangering her chances to get the part. He however doesn't realise this and is again happy as an adolescent when she says yes.

With the start of their contact also begin the indications that something will go wrong. First, there is Yoshikawa again voicing his concern. Seconds after Aoyama gets off the phone with Asami, his friend calls to say that the reference Asami gave at the audition is false. The contact she mentioned, a record company producer named Shibata, disappeared over a year ago. Then, Shigehiko tells his father that he already broke up with the girl he brought home the night before. "Girls are so unpredictable," he exclaims and his remark not only functions as an omen of what's to come for Aoyama, but also another instance in which a man acknowledges his tack of understanding of women. The third indication is a subtler one and one brought across entirely through stylistic means: Aoyama and Asami sit facing each other at a restaurant table on their first date. The conversation is obviously shot from two camera standpoints, as is the custom for dialogue scenes. However, instead of assuming two neutral points of view, Miike chooses to do only one: an over-the-shoulder shot to represent Aoyama. For Asami he uses a subjective point-of-view shot. This puts the scene somewhat off balance and hints at something not being quite as it should be. The full impact of this use of the subjective camera doesn't become clear until later in the film, when Miike

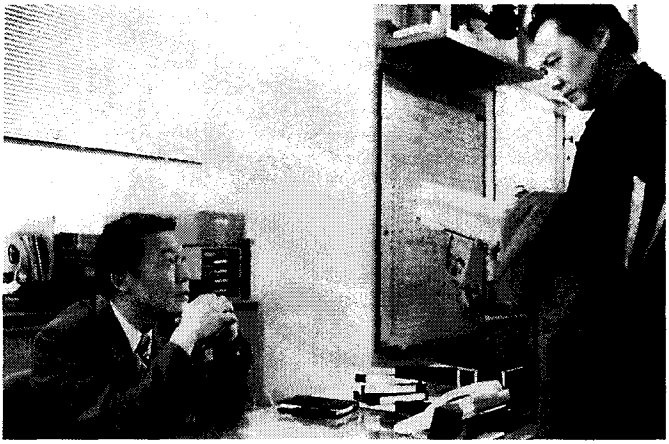
uses it again without establishing the character it belongs to. Thanks to the scene in the restaurant, we immediately realise it represents Asami.

The date nevertheless seems to be a success. The two get along well and Asami agrees to go out with him again: When Aoyama tells Yoshikawa the good news, more than ever convinced that he's found the perfect partner, his friend voices his distrust. Saying Asami sounds too ideal, he advises Aoyama to not call her for a while lest he lose his head and be blinded by love. Again showing how the opinions of others have an effect on him, Aoyama, hesitantly, complies with his friend's wishes. Choosing to go to sleep instead of picking up the phone, that night he has a dream of his dead wife Ryôko (Miyuki Matsuda) disappearing behind a tree. This image indicates Aoyama's feeling of closing off a chapter of his life and his belief that he has found a new love. Employing the juxtaposition he used to such good effect in or Alive, Miike cots from Aoyama's dream to a shot of Asami's room. The composition of this shot, which runs as a visual motif throughout the film, gives another signal about the young woman's mental state. The apartment is old and cramped, and Asami sits on her knees with her head bowed, immobile, her long black hair covering her face. There are only two objects in the room: atelephone - positioned in such a way that it's clear Asami is waiting for Aoyama's call - and a large bag with unknown contents.



Together, yet apart:
Aoyama and Asami seem to have their minds on other things.

In the scenes that follow, Miike keeps cutting back and forth between Aoyama's hesitation to pick up his telephone and Asami waiting immobile next to hers. Each succeeding shot of Asami's room puts more emphasis on the presence of the bag. Then Aoyamafinally decides to call her and the way her reaction to the ringing telephone is shot is an example of impeccable timing, from the close-up of her mouth slowly curling up into a smile to the moment the bag suddenly jumps up and rolls around with a beastly growl.



Stills of *Audition* courtesy of Rapid Eye Movies. © 1999 Omega Project

The two men discuss their plans for the audition.

It's the film's big – and thanks to the timing of the scene very effective – shock moment, but it also functions as the final proof that there is something very wrong with Asami. It's the turning point in the film as from now on the audience has more knowledge of Asami's character than Aoyama does. Miike doesn't use the audience's knowledge to create suspense, but instead makes it function to display the internal conflicts in Asami's character. This is what makes *Audition* a character study, not a suspense film or even a horror film. Case in point is the continuation of this same scene. Instead of ending with the shock moment, it goes on to show Asami picking up the phone and talking to Aoyama as if nothing had happened.

The two agree to a new date and their conversation on that evening shows them becoming closer and more open about themselves. Asami talks about her family background and her parents who moved away from Tokyo so her father could play golf. Aoyama is so sure of Asami now that he tells Shigehiko that he has found the women he wants to marry. He and Asami take a weekend trip to the coast, where he intends to propose to her. Arriving in their hotel room, he is nervous and talks incessantly, until Asami quietly takes off her robe and gets into bed. She asks him to love her exclusively, and nobody but her. But before she lets him answer she slowly pulls back the sheets to expose the scars on the insides of her thighs. "I was burnt as a child," she explains. He needs to accept this before she will let him closer. Aoyama does and the two make love for the first time.

Waking up later that night he finds her gone. The hotel receptionist tells him she has left. Aoyama discovers she hasn't simply left, she's disappeared. There's no reply on the phone and it's then that he realises he doesn't even know her address. He has to turn to

Yoshikawa in the hope of finding it, but his friend can't help him either. In fact, the two end up arguing when Yoshikawa tells him to forget about her and acknowledge that he has been deceived.

To find Asami, Aoyama uses what little information he has of her, which confronts him with the fact that he knows absolutely nothing about this woman he was ready to take as his wife. He looks up the address of the ballet school she went to as a child, only to find the place boarded up. Breaking in, he discovers her ballet teacher, a wheelchair-ridden old man (Renji Ishibashi) sitting at a piano, her ballet shoes still dangling from the handle of his chair. A flashback shows him burning a young Asami on the thighs with a branding iron to force her to dance better. Aoyama next makes his way to the bar where Asami said she works part time. This place too he finds closed and a neighbour tells him its owner was murdered one year prior, chopped into pieces that were scattered all over the bar. He continues to say that when the police had gathered all the parts, they found a tongue, an ear and three fingers too many.

The scenes of Aoyama's search mark a sudden shift in style. Miike uses garish lighting and tilted angles, as well as a series of jump cuts to close-ups of severed body parts that represent Aoyama's imagination. The acting changes too, becoming more exaggerated to tit with the change of tone. It's clear that these effects are meant to make us feel Aoyama's confusion, but the effect is too strong, particularly since the audience is already aware of Asami's dark side. The shots of body parts, particularly a close-up of a palpitating severed tongue, provoke laughter more than anything else.

While Aoyama is out on his search, somebody enters his house. discovers the photo of his late wife on his desk, drugs hiswhiskyandattacks his dog. From thefactthatthissequence is shot with a subjective camera, we immediately know that it's Asami - referring to the use of this technique in the scene of their first date. When Aoyama returns home and drinks the whisky, he loses consciousness and falls over. Just before he hits the floor, Miike cuts back to the couple's second date. Or at least, the setting is the same, but their conversation is different. This time, Asami tells him the truth about herself, how her parents divorced when she was a child, how she was physically abused by her aunt and uncle before going to live with her mother and her stepfather (the ballet teacher Shimada) and that thanks to her love for ballet she got through. She says to Aoyama that she wants to tell him everything about herself, and the scene plays like the way their second date ideally should have gone. If they had been truthful to each other, it might have worked out between them.

Aoyama's hallucination then becomes a combination of his guilt and desires rolled into one. First his wife tells him he can't have Asami (the opposite of the dream he had before and a direct link to Asami finding Ryôko's photograph on hi desk, which for Asami meant the discovery that he doesn't love only her). Next, the setting changes and Aoyama is with Asami inside her small apartment. She drops to her knees and opens his pants. He at first protests, but eventually lets her suck him, until she is suddenly replaced by his secretary - who tells him she is still in love with him -then by Shigehiko's high school girlfriend. He recoils and stumbles over the bag.

Here the hallucination changes its function again and becomes his imagination of the acts Asami must have committed, based on his detective work earlier: the bag opens and a man comes crawling out. He misses both feet as well an ear, a tongue and three fingers. all of which have clearly been severed from his body (the man, suggested to be Shibata the

Left: Feminism or failed love? Aoyama finds himself at the mercy of Asami.
Right: The tools of the trade.

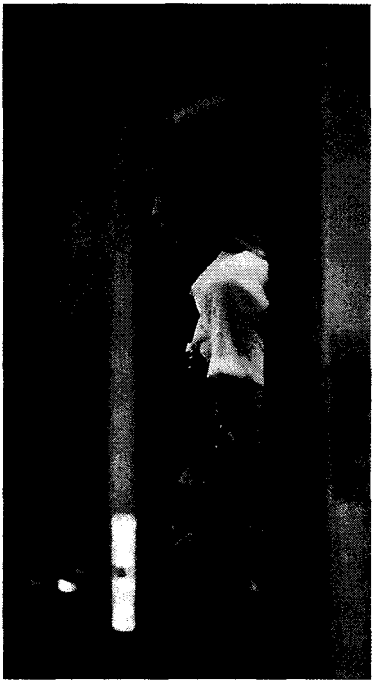
missing record producer, is played by an unrecognisable Ren Ôsugi). Asami comes in to feed him a bowl of her own vomit. When the man starts lapping it up, she turns into the childhood version of herself – a little girl who pets the mutilated man as if he were her dog. With this, Mike contrasts the violent acts of the adult with the innocence of the child – not simply to create a contrast, but to invoke what happened in the character's life that made the innocent child turn into the violent adult (this concept would form the basis of Dead of *Alive 2*, released later the same year). Then he does the opposite to say the same thing: Shimada burns the thighs of the adult Asami. The reason for this is that we view this scene through the eyes (or rather: inside the mind) of Aoyama. Since he only knows the adult Asami, it's through applying her image to the events of her past that he manages to relate to her suffering. For him, the adult is concrete, the child abstract, but the vision of the adult Asami getting burned makes the life of the child as real as the adult.

Aoyama's hallucination finally culminates in a montage of images, which combines the functions of all the previous segments: Asami severs Shimada's head with a wire from his own piano: Ryôko attacked by Asami for saying she can't have her husband; Aoyama's housekeeper Rie naked and embracing the man in the bag; one of the bagman's fingers falling into a jar of formaldehyde; and finally Shimada's severed head fatling onto the ground, after which Aoyama awakes from his hallucination to find himself lying paralysed on the floor of his house. He's conscious but unable to move and sees Asami, dressed in a leather apron and gloves, opening a bagtopull out handfulsof largeneedles, apianowireand a hugesyringe. In the kitchen, the family dog lies dead with its neck broken as a sign of what's to come for Aoyama.

Asami's torture of Aoyama is an interesting scene for several reasons. First of all on a formal level. The acts are not so much portrayed as suggested in most cases. Both the injection of the syringe into Aoyama's tongue and the insertion of needles into his chest and eyes are implied, at most what is shown is the beginning touch and the final result. The only

explicit moment in the scene is the severing of his foot. What makes the scene so very effective is Miike's use of sound (suggesting what is not shown) and Eihi Shiina's performance. The actress smiles when she commits these acts and talks in a hushed, almost comforting voice. When Asami saws Aoyama's foot off with piano wire, she does it with unabashed glee, while the sounds ("kiri-kiri-kiri") she utters when she drives the needles into his chest are such a stark contrast with what she's doing, it makes the act itself even more disturbing. It's this contrast between the act and the person who commits it (Shiina's frail beauty certainly adds to this) that makes the scene as powerful as it is (famously causing numerous audience walkouts wherever it was shown).

The other reason is that by having a woman overpower a man -who lies helpless at her feet - there is the implication of feminist intent. Indeed, many critics in Europe and the USA read the film as a feminist statement and the torture scene was regarded as proof. The film sets up a series of incidents which could be regarded as sexist: Aoyama's list of criteria for his new bride, the impersonal way in which he goes about finding his candidate, the fact that his choice is half his age, his abuse of power, the character of Yoshikawa and most of all the audition scene itself, in which thirty women are deceived into baring their breasts and their innermost feelings to two complete strangers because of one man who doesn't have the patience to meet women on equal terms.



Asami silently goes about her way.

With this in mind, it's easy to read Asami's mutilation of Aoyama as revenge, a form of 'just desserts' for the wrongs he has done her and other women. But to interpret Asami as an angel of vengeance is to mistake her character. Her actions are not motivated by an ideological agenda. At no time during the film is she a representative for an entire gender, just an individual with a troubled history. Also, to interpret her in this way is to deny the fact that she too has lied and deceived. During her torture, she calls Aoyama a liar and blames him for deceiving her and the women at the audition. She's right, but self-righteously so. From the moment they met, everything she told Aoyama about herself was a lie. Her feelings were true, without doubt, but they came dressed in lies. When during Aoyama's

Asami gets ready to sever some family ties.

hallucination she says: "I want to tell you everything," this implies that before that moment she didn't. The other source for Asami's wrath is the discovery that he doesn't love only her. Learning about his late wife and his son makes her feel betrayed, but her demand of exclusive rights to Aoyama's love is unrealistic. Finally, the function of Asami as a feminist symbol is undermined by the fact that she killed her female manager in the bar where she worked.

But the feminist reading also fails because of Aoyama. Yoshikawa may be regarded as a male chauvinist, but to Aoyama there are far too many nuances for him to be dismissed as such. He recognises the impersonal nature of the audition and feels ashamed forgoing through with it ("I feel like a criminal," he says to his friend before the first candidate is let into the room). The most he can be blamed for is being influenced by others. But ironically it's after he has severed his ties with Yoshikawa that he gets into real trouble. Also, despite the deception he employed to get her, Aoyama's feelings for Asami are undeniably true. He is very much in love with this young woman, as confirmed by his acceptance of her, scars and all.

Additionally, interpreting the film as feminist also means mistaking its use of sexism, which is never a basis for judgment, but merely an example of how people misunderstand others. This misunderstanding is what the film revolves around, more specifically two individuals misunderstanding each other. The two scenes that follow the torture corroborate this. When Shigehiko comes home, Asami is forced to stop her torture of Aoyama and hide. The moment the boy finds his father, she attacks him from behind. Right then the film cuts back to Aoyama waking up in the beach side hotel after making love to Asami. Again, the scene plays differently than before. He scurries to pull back the sheets and is relieved to find that both his feet are still attached. Asami, still lying beside him, wakes up as a result

One of the finale's most effective moments: Eihi Shiina's unsettling smile.

and asks him what's wrong, to which he naturally replies "Nothing," as if to suggest the torture was all a bad anxiety dream. But then she says to him that she accepts his proposal of marriage. If this film had been a black comedy, it would have ended there, but we see the hesitation on Aoyama's face, which forms his acknowledgement that he does not and never will be able to know Asami as an individual.

Miike then cuts back to Asami attacking Shigehiko with a can of mace. The boy ducks away and runs up the stairs in order to get away from her. Asami follows him up and sprays him, but the young man kicks her and sends her flying down the stairwell. Using the same principle he employed during the torture scene, Miike stays on the empty stairwell as we hear Asami hit the floor. Then he cuts to her lying at the foot of the steps with her neck broken. Like the tortured Aoyama. she is unable to move. Her head is turned in his direction. As Aoyama and Asami lie there staring at each other, their eyes convey that they are finally beyond lies.

MPD-PSYCHO

Taiju Jinkaku Tantei Psycho - Amamiya Kazuhiko No Kikan

2000

Miike's third television series in two years revolves around what is maybe his most drastic portrayal of rootlessness yet. *MPD-Psycho's* protagonist (Naoki Hosaka. who played a small supporting role in *White-Collar* Worker *Kintaro*) suffers from the purest form of rootlessness imaginable: the loss of his personal identity. Suffering from multiple personality disorder induced by a traumatic gunfight (the MPD in the title is an abbreviation of 'multiple personality detective'), he moves between the personalities of young policeman Yôsuke Kobayashi and freelance criminal profiler Kazuhiko Amamiya (who moreover has no idea about the events that happened in his own childhood). In the course of the story he receives a third personality, that of Shinji Nishizono, the very same killer he has been tracking in both his guises. This involuntary switching of identity is shared by a host of characters in *MPD-Psycho*, many of whom commit murders while under a form of possession.

Although this series is the first case in Miike's filmography where rootlessness is mental in origin, the thematic process that arises from it is identical to all other forms. Yôsuke Kobayashi is fired from the police force after killing a suspect, thus turning him into an outcast. The murder triggers his schizophrenia and he becomes Kazuhiko Amamiya, a freelance profiler. The word 'freelance' hints at the position of an outsider, just as the occupation of a profiler (a person who places himself insidethe mind of another individual) is closely related to the mental rootlessness from which he already suffers. Amamiya then forms a group with several fellow outcasts: Machi Izono (Tomoko Nakajima), another freelance profiler; Tôru Sasayama (Ren Ôsugi), Kobayashi's former superior who is himself treated with contempt by his bosses; and Tôru's novice assistant Manabe, who is more fitted to his *otaku* hobby of figurine building than to anything resembling police work. The group's aim is to solve a series of violent murders, the solution to which will both vindicate Kobayashi and form the key to unlock Amamiya's mysterious past.

Through his investigations the protagonist of *MPD-Psycho* is in a position to undo his own state of rootlessness, which is also a first in Miike's oeuvre. Previously all forms of rootlessness were inescapable. Even the protagonists of ***The Bird People*** in China and ***The Guys from Paradise*** never escaped their geographical rootlessness. Instead they became new beings by embracing their position, enabling them to move beyond the rootless state. In Amamiya's case, the unlocking of his past will negate his rootlessness. Knowing what happened in his childhood will return both him and Kobayashi their roots, since it becomes clear that the two personalities share the same traumatic childhood experience. It's this trauma that allowed the slide into schizophrenia.

That Miike would place the solution in childhood fits in with the treatment of childhood in his films. For many characters a flight into nostalgia is a way to escape rootlessness, with childhood (or the selective memory of it) serving as a surrogate root. Amamiya's attempt to unlock his past is a perfect example. To know the events of his childhood will change nothing physically about his present-day situation, yet it makes a world of difference. Miike indicates from the very first scene of the first episode that childhood. is where the character's

true identity lies. The series opens literally inside the brain of its protagonist. As we travel past the synapses and hear a voice-over asking him who he is (mentioning the names of Kobayashi, Amamiya and Shinji Nishizono as possibilities), we see images of him as a child. This suggests that in only in childhood was the answer to this question clear.

Despite the importance given to the child, the childhood idyll is surprisingly un-idyllic and the invulnerable child completely absent from ***MPD-Psycho.*** Killers and victims alike include numerous teenagers, with students at a catholic girls' school creating a massacre among their classmates, a woman kidnapping newborn children (who are thereby severed from their mothers, made orphans and consequently become rootless individuals) and an entire university full of students programmed to act like fascist drones, spending their lunch breaks marching across campus giving a collective nazi salute to the head of the school. When Amamiya finally remembers his past, he realises that as a child he intentionally let his friends die in a fire he himself lit.

The presence of the programmed children is an indication of the reasons for the seeming change of heart on the part of the director. ***MPD-Psycho's*** plot revolves around the manipulation of people's personalities and will, the source of which is found in a religious cult believed to be disbanded.The leader of this cult was a would-be prophet with rock star aspirations called Lucy Monostone (Tomorowo Taguchi), whose numerous former followers are found all through society, ranging from young to old but identifiable by a single shared characteristic: a transplanted, barcoded eye that acts a receiver for the signal which triggers the murderous impulses. (This idea of manipulation that indiscriminately drives all ages into relentless violence resurfaces in ***Ichi the Killer.)***

MPD-Psycho is the first production for which Takashi Miike is credited as a writer. His official credit is "adaptation by", with Eiji Ôtsuka, on whose manga and novels the series is based, taking scriptwriting credit. In actual fact the teleplay was written by Miike himself, from a treatment by Ôtsuka. The six-part series, with episodes running just under one hour each in length, plays more like an episodic serial than either seasons of ***Tennen Shôjo Mann.*** Although the main division is in three parts, the script was clearly structured for six individual episodes, with five main murder cases and a resolution. Unfortunately this structure has a somewhat unbalanced result, with the final episode serving too obviously as the occasion to tie up loose ends. It tries to answer all the questions posed in the previous five parts (also literally, since most of the dialogue of the series consists of questions and reflection, but in the sixth episodes of explanations), which results in an overabundance of explanatory dialogue that is sometimes very contrived within the context of the plot. This starts starts at the end of episode five, where Amamiya and his colleague Machi have a conversation in a hospital that lasts several minutes, while a blazing inferno rages all around them. In episode six Tôru, who has functioned throughout as an observer and the representative of the audience's point of view, rather uncharacteristically comes up with most of the answers to the mystery surrounding the murders and Amamiya's childhood.

Additionally, in restructuring the plot of the manga and novels, some unfortunate choices were made that diminish the impact of some scenes, particularly the kidnapping and mutilation of Kobayashi's girlfriend Chizuko. In the original manga this prompted Kobayashi to hunt down and kill the culprit, thus triggering his schizophrenia and turning him into Amamiya. Here this event comes after the change to Amamiya has already occurred, meaning that the emotional response from his character is a lot less drastic. And while the image of the

limbless, living torso is an impressive sight in its own right, by having it appear later it has been reduced from the source of the plot to being just one in a long line of bizarre crimes. Although such problems could be blamed on Miike's inexperience as a scriptwriter, it would be unfair to call him a bad writer. Even *Tennen Shôjo* Mann (written by professional screenwriter Itaru Era) manifested similar troubles, not to mention the blatant disregard for structure in the writing of Hisao Maki, whose work is markedly poorer than what Miike achieves by himself on MPD-Psycho.

While the narrative may be somewhat wanting, the style of the series is decidedly more impressive. Building on the work he did with Hideo Yamamoto on *Tennen Shôjo Mann* Next Miike takes a step closer to surrealism with the help of Naosuke Imaizumi. Strikingly lit, with an overwhelmingly intense colour scheme, *MPD-Psycho* dispels the notion that shooting on video always results in unappealing, cheap looking images. This is a world where fluorescent green snow falls, sunsets bathe everything in gold, people don't get wet in the rain and the protagonist goes to meditate on a beach dotted with dozens of half-buried iMac computers[17]. But where the style in *Tennen Shôjo Mann* Next had little or no function beyond creating a mood, here it exists in a more symbiotic relationship with the narrative and the themes. The style renders the identity of the world in which the story is set, particularly in its relation to the laws of physics, as uncertain and the behaviour of the environment as unpredictable as that of the characters themselves. This kind of symbiotic relationship between form and content Miike would perfect in his next film, *The City of Lost Souls.*

THE CITY OF LOST SOULS
Hyôryûgai

2000

The City *of* Lost Souls is Takashi Miike's most successful attempt at achieving complete symbiosis between form and content. The principle of rootlessness serves as the starting point (both the English and the original Japanese title, which translates as 'drifting town', allude to it) and is applied to both levels. It infuses story and characters, taking the depiction of rootlessness and outcasts to its apogee by turning the tables and forcing the Japanese characters into the role of outsiders in their own society. At the same time it's applied to the editing, camerawork and mise-en-scene, which combine to intentionally disorientate the audience, to disconnect them from their own roots as viewers, making it impossible for them to rely on expectations. This rupture in turn functions to create acceptance of the situation the film presents on the content level.

This approach starts almost immediately at the beginning of the film, with a prologue set in a Brazilian town that more closely resembles a desert outpost from a spaghetti western. Then the film segues into one of Miike's trademarks montages, which like that of *Blues* Harp intercuts the chronological flow of the story with brief shots from later moments in the film. These two sequences introduce the elements of Miike's style as employed throughout in an attempt to disorient the viewer:

- In **editing:** the use of successive jump cuts during a single shot; the intercutting of simultaneous but separate events that come together at a common point from which a scene is then continued (thus starting a scene from two separate points of view); and editing to the rhythm of music (which ranges from metal to Spanish acoustic guitar).
- In **camerawork:** the use of strong colours (courtesy of Naosuke Imaizumi who here balances them not with deep blacks but with brightness); and several ingeniously devised camera set-ups that combine the effects of dolly, crane and fixed camera into single-take scenes lasting between five and ten minutes.
- In **mise-en-&me:** the placing of potentially familiar (i.e. genre-related) scenes in unfamiliar settings – examples include the spaghetti western look of the Brazilian town; drug dealers whose headquarters is a cave beneath a cockfight arena, which is constructed in a forgotten section of the Tokyo subway system; a billboard featuring the images of a geisha and Mount Fuji, in the middle of what looks a lot like the desert of Southern California, with a caption reading "Saitama prefecture"; a chase on foot through the streets of Shinjuku that ends in a Los Angeles alleyway. Then there are the impossible feats performed by the characters: the protagonists jump out of a hovering helicopter and crash land in an alley, sending up thick clouds of smoke and debris, and striding out without so much as a stain on their clothes or a bruise on their faces; a cockfight turns into a parody of the Wachowski brothers' film The *Matrix* when the two competing birds start using martial arts.

DEAD OR ALIVE 2

Dead or Alive 2 ▬ Tôbôsha

2000

In *Audition,* Miike employed the method of substituting a character with her childhood self, in order to invoke the process this character went through in life that eventually resulted in her committing the acts she does. In other words: what happened in your life to make you what you are? This is the question upon which *Dead or Alive 2* is based.

A sequel in name only, *Dead or Alive 2* reunites Miike with his two lead actors Show Aikawa and Riki Takeuchi, but differs greatly from part one in story, characters and theme. The ethnic rootlessness of the *zanryu koji* is replaced here by the genealogical rootlessness of the orphaned child, who despite this rootlessness is as invulnerable as ever. In fact, the child needs to be invulnerable for the film's central concept to work. When the film asks the question of what happened in one's lifetimeto make the innocent child a violent adult, this implies that the change came after childhood.The innocent, invulnerable child is as crucial to this as the violent adult, because the two factors represent the most drastic change imaginable. (In addition to making the violence functional, this is also a very illuminating example of how Miike's films relate to genre. Outwardly a gangster film, internally the violence exists for completely different reasons than complying with genre rules.)

While the film asks the question of what happened in the characters' lives to make them what they are, it never supplies the answer. Giving answers is not the intention. This is not a film that signals social ills, but a film that makes its own characters look inward. It provokes this introspection by way of another question, which is asked, in simple white letters overablackbackground, to thetwoprotagonistsatvariousintervals throughout the film: "Where are you?" Its full meaning is only revealed in the film's final scene, when a newborn baby is asked: "Where are you going?" Once, the two criminals Mizuki (Aikawa) and Shu (Takeuchi) were as innocent and unspoilt as that baby, with their whole lives ahead of them ("Where are you going?"), only to become what they are today: killers, one of whom is dying of cancer (Where are you?").

It's this process and the contrast between child and adult that forms the basis for the narrative as well as the style of Dead or Alive *2,* resulting in Miike's greatest achievement, in cinematic terms as well as in terms of drama, emotion and humanity. Although the latter largely results from the former, *The City* of Lost Souls showed that cinematic achievements don't necessarily mean that the film works on an emotional level. *Dead or Alive 2* has both and it is for this reason that it rises above all the director's other work, save perhaps for *Kishiwada Shônen Ġurentai ▬ Bôkyô.*

Miike sets up the central theme in the first few shots. The film opens with a wide shot and then a close-up of a young man, followed by that question: "Where are you?" This young man will not return until halfway through the film, when he is killed in a matter of seconds, the first victim of a Moody battle between Chinese and Japanese gangsters. He looks to be in his early twenties at most, more likely his late teens, and the fact that he is killed mercilessly strongly underlines the point of the film (as indeed does all the violence in *Dead or Alive 2).*

Following the question, we see a shot of planet earth. While at the same time being one of the very few elements that tie this film to its predecessor – which also ended with a shot of the planet – it also gives the viewer one possible answer to the question. But to simply reply "On planet earth," would be too obvious and broad an answer, which is exactly why it is narrowed down in the next few shots: a time-lapse of daybreak over Tokyo, then straight to a dialogue between protagonist Mizuki and the unnamed man who hired him (played by filmmaker Shinya Tsukamoto), explaining the reasons for his employment and establishing his character. Mizuki needs to kill the leader of a yakuza group in order to provoke a gang war, which will allow a third group to grab a slice of the underworld pie. So for Mizuki the answer to the question "Where are you?" is: "On earth, in Tokyo, killing people for a living."

The reasons behind the assassination and the gang war are insignificant beyond the fact that the resulting violence has the contrasting function described above. In this context, the role of Mizuki's employer and his exact motivations remain shrouded in mystery, precisely because it's superfluous information. His background is unimportant and he remains nameless. What we get to know of him is that he is a magician of some sort, but this has less to do with his background than with Miike's habit of giving what might otherwise have been a perfunctory character a trait that will make him memorable instead (an effect also achieved by Tsukamoto's flamboyant performance).

Mizuki's character on the other hand is amply established with this scene. Bleached-blond, wearing a loud aloha shirt and baggy pants, he looks less like a hitman than an overgrown adult, something the magician confirms when he tells him he looks like a kid and should buy some decent clothes. The fact that Mizuki is in touch with his childhood plays a significant role later in the film, because it serves as the catalyst for the two protagonists' rediscovery of childhood and the feeling of being a child.

Mizuki goes to work and captures his target in the scope of his rifle. But just before he can pull the trigger, the gangster is killed by one of his own men instead. This crossing of paths of two characters is another example of the spatial link, which here functions in the same way as in preceding films, namely to set the stage for a later confrontation. As the film continues however, Mizuki and the man who outsmarted him keep sharing the same space without either of them realising it and the threat of a confrontation gradually diminishes. Indeed, the result is quite the opposite since the rival gunman is later revealed to be Mizuki's childhood friend Shu.

Mizuki claims the murder of the mobster as his own and collects the bounty from his employer. Moments after Mizuki has left, the magician calls him up with a demand for the money to be returned, since he and his own bosses have found out Mizuki wasn't the person who pulled the trigger. The hitman flees Tokyo with his money, leaving the city a battlefield: the magician's employers kill him for not being able to return the money, while the Japanese start war with the Chinese who they suspect of having bumped off their boss.

This violence is the result of the protagonists' actions and therefore illustrates the kind of world they live in and the life they lead as adults. To further emphasise this, Miike immediately juxtaposes it with nostalgic peacefulness: Mizuki safely on board a boat that carries him back to the island and the orphanage where he grew up, and thereby back to his own childhood. The boat ride itself is already a way of m-experiencing that childhood, as Mizuki recounts how he made the same journey numerous times as a child. What provokes this reminiscence is not the boat itself but the noodle soup he orders at the bar, which he and

his friends used to eat in a very specific way: eating the soup first and leaving the piece of tofu insideforlast.Miikeemploys this memoryasawaytoestablish Shu, also on boardalthough neither knows about the other's presence, as coming from the same island as Mizuki. We hear Mizuki's explanation as a voice-over, while the image cuts between Mizuki and Shu simultaneously eating their soup in exactly the same manner. (The use of an indistinct island location as these characters' childhood home indicates that this is not a film about childhood in itself. It's not tied to a geographical base the way Miike's films about childhood usually are, because the function of childhood here is contrast. The fact that the characters are orphans naturally results from this, since it makes them rootless and therefore not tied to a geographical homeland.)

The pay-off to this build-up comes when the two men meet face-to-face after arriving on the island. This is the first time they meet since they were children, and when Shu says he spent many years looking for Mizuki, Miike cuts to a flashback of the two boys on a beach. In this flashback, the young Mizuki has just been adopted and is spending his last days in the orphanage. We see him drawing the face of a kappa, a creature from Japanese mythology known for its mischievous nature, in the sand (the kappa is significant because it reflects Mizuki's own personality and because the image will reappear later in the film). When he tells Shu he wants to become a painter or a manga artist, this again emphasises the theme of the film and the difference between the child and the adult he becomes, because we already know that he will grown into a killer instead. Immediately following this, Miike cuts to a flashforward of the adult Mizuki and Shu getting shot. Thus he shows both the beginning of the journey (Mizuki about to leave the island) and the end, underlining the central theme through juxtaposition.

After their return to the island, Shu and Mizuki rediscover the places where they spent their childhood, but also that they are now physically too big to use most of the playground instruments (which again emphasises the contrast between child and adult).They meet their childhood friend Kôhei (Kenichi Endô in the first of a slew of appearances in the director's films) – who still lives on the island and has married fellow orphan Chieko, who is now pregnant with his child – and the three of them continue to play the games they played as children. This regression towards childhood is contrasted with flashbacks detailing the boys' final days on the island: Mizuki leaves, only to find that his foster father (a painter, played by Ren Ôsugi) has committed suicide. He goes off into the world on his own, but his letters to Shu keep up the appearance that he is living a happy life with his new family. These letters make Shu decide to look him up and so he too leaves the island to go look for his friend. In these flashbacks we see both characters as children heading towards maturity, while in the present day we see them as adults returning to childhood.

This return continues when they find that the orphanage where they grew up is still operational. The process culminates in Mizuki and Shu taking the lead in a play for all the children on the island, after the actors themselves are hurt in a freak car crash. Shu performs dressed as a lion and Mizuki as a *kappa* (aside from obviously referring back to the moment Mizuki drew a *kappa* in the sand, the costume he wears is also uncannily similar to a kappa costume worn by a character in one brief scene in *Eyecatch Junction),* which shows that they are mentally back in touch with their childhood. This results in more than a fair share of juvenile sexual innuendo as well, with Mizuki wearing a flashlight as a fake penis under his costume, something that refers to his one-time sabotaging of the nativity play by

equipping himself with a similar fake member. The act goes down a storm with the kids in the audience.

The sequence of the school play, which symbolises the protagonists' complete rediscovery of childhood, is intercut with scenes of the violent, blood-drenched gang war back in Tokyo. Here we see the function of the violence put to use: it is necessary to counterpoint the scene on the island, to show the world these two men, who have become children again, live in.Thefact that the men who caused this massacre are now entertaining children strongly underlines the film's central question of how they could have become those violent adults.

At this point, Mizuki and Shu have effectively attained the mental state of children, which changes the way they look at the world and at their own lives. The style of the film follows suit, with Miike using naivety and exaggeration to mirror the child's point of view (finding its origin in *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai - Bôkyô*, this would later form the basis for the stylistic approach to *The Happiness of the Katakuris*). The two decide to put their skills as hitmen to proper use by donating the money they make to a children's charity. They figure that with killing one underworld kingpin, they make enough money to buy vaccinations for thousands of children in third world countries. Shu says he will follow Mizuki "until I die", which holds an ominous undertone because Miike cuts to the blood Shu coughed up in the toilet as a result of the cancer he carries inside him, the same cancer that made him decide to shoot his own boss and escape to the place where he grew up.

The two men go to Osaka where they hire themselves out as paid assassins. This is shown in a montage in which every shot and the way it is visualised reflects their childlike mental states. Many of the killings are exaggerated: Shu shoots an entire neon sign off a roof and one of their victims is equipped with an enormous dick. A number of murders are carried out by way of childish pranks, while the two men find time between assassinations to live out boyhood fantasies of adult masculinity like being construction workers.Then they sprout wings after completing the killings. This has been interpreted by many as a symbol for the characters' good deeds, as if the two men become angels as a result of donating money. However, the wings aren't those of angels, but of birds. They refer to the drawing Shu made as a child, which depicted a black bird and white bird flying away from the island, symbolising Shu's image of him and Mizuki becoming adults, leaving their home and spreading their wings. Now, as adults having returned to being children, this is exactly what they do.

Indeed the symbolism goes further, as moments after they sprout wings they physically transform into the childhood versions of themselves. Substituting the adult with the child in the midst of committing a violent act is the ultimate expression of the film's central theme: the men who commit these acts were once children.The transformation also reflects their mental states and their changed perception. It's as children that they first notice the comet that has been visible in the nighttime sky for almost the entire film (it's already present in the shot of the planet at the start of the film), thus suggesting that by finding the child inside themselves they have also become more open to wonder.

We see them as children depositing the money they make into the bank accounts of the charity (naturally fooling around childishly with the many buttons of the automatic deposit machine), having gotten rid of "jerks" so that poor children may live. Miike visualises this by intercutting news footage of African children: first sick, then after the deposit cheering. Though this use of actual news footage has been considered to be in poor taste, thus

ridiculously insinuating that Miike and his films exist in some kind of moral vacuum, it functions to accentuate the naivety of Shu and Mizuki. In their childish minds they honestly believe they can help an entire continent by eliminating the Osaka underworld. In brief, every shot in this montage reflects their mental states as children, which in turn contrasts the violent acts they commit and expresses the film's central theme.

The montage also sets up the characters'own end. Like before, their acts have repercussions. The wife of one of their victims (the man with the giant penis, who was, as a framed picture of him stated, "Augusts most requested host") in turn hires three hitmen to kill the men who murdered her husband. Like the magician before, these hitmen (one of whom is played by Teah, star of The *City of* Lost Souls) have no names and no background and again Miike embellishes them with unusual characteristics in order to give them more presence than their function in the narrative allows them. He makes them silent and lets them communicate through text messages sent between their mobile phones.

The three new hitmen start their search but find the wrong man first. Nevertheless, they kill him. This functions to establish their cold-heartedness, but nevertheless the killing is shown with restraint, in the shape of abstract polygons representing the victim's head splitting into four pieces from the bullets that are shot through it. The reason for this particular visualisation is that on the one hand Miike needs to establish these characters as formidable opponents for Mizuki and Shu -which requires a cold-blooded murder-while on the other hand the depiction of explicit violence in this film is exclusively limited to its function as contrast to the innocence of childhood. This scene doesn't function in this particular way, therefore the director needs to find a way to show the killing clearly but not explicitly. Hence the abstraction of the computer-generated image, which clearly shows the method without becoming explicit or gory.

The confrontation between the two sets of hitmen comes moments after Mizuki has discovered that Shu is coughing up blood. Shu's condition is deteriorating fast, which is significant in the light of the outcome of the battle. The three opponents suddenly appear and shoot Mizuki. Shu, who at this point is barely able to stand, gets up and fires back. But what we see is not three hitmen getting shot, but three children. Shu's opponents are violent adults, but they too were once innocent children. Shu, who's now on the verge of death but has gone through the reversion to childhood himself, understands that and therefore sees them as children. He nevertheless pulls the trigger and kills them, because he knows they, like himself and Mizuki, are adults who can never go back to actually being children.

The scene fades out on the shot of Mizuki and Shu sitting side-by-side, immobile and drenched in their own blood. This is the shot the film flashforwarded to earlier and as a result of this the audience is prepared to see the characters die. Like in the prolonged car crash scene in *Kishiwada Shônen* Gurentai - *Chikemuri Junjô* Hen, Miike uses this expectation of the audience to extend the story and bring it full circle He allows the characters to complete their journey even beyond death, which brings to mind the denouement of Ley Lines. He fades back in on Shu and Mizuki heading back to the island by train and boat, alive and well but still completely covered in blood. For a brief moment, the director allows Shu and Mizuki the same invulnerability they had as children, in order for them to go back to where they came from and die in peace. En route they are gawked at by everyone they pass, while they themselves seem quite oblivious to the fact they are supposed to be dead. They sit on the deck of the boat, eating soup and wondering about the birth of Kôhei's child. Then Mizuki

drops dead and Shu calmly remarks: 'You always had to be the first at everything", drawing a parallel with his friend having been the first to leave the island.

The film cuts to another flashback, of Shu and Mizuki first arriving on the island and the start of their friendship as they climb up a hill overlooking the sea together. Again Miike juxtaposes the beginning and the end of the journey, because he then cuts back to the present and to Shu carrying Mizuki's body over his shoulders, onto the island and up the same hill they climbed as children, where Shu at last gives up the ghost too.

Finally, the last scene of the film is of Kôhei and Chieko bringing home their newborn baby. We see a close-up of this unspoilt child, followed by the question that makes everything the viewer has seen fall precisely into place: "Where are you going?

VISITOR Q

2001

Visitor Q is a prime example of Takashi Miike's uncalculating approach to filmmaking in general and his own career in particular. Whereas *The City of* Lost Souls gave him the highest budget he had ever worked with, *Visitor* Q was probably the lowest. Shot on video for the equivalent of US$ 70,000, despite its meagre resources the film avoided the pitfalls of other recent low-budget fare like *Silver.*

Working with his regular collaborators, including Hideo Yamamoto, Miike managed to turn the detractions into a virtue through very functional and deliberate use of the digital video format. Taking the successful use of DV on *Tennen Shôjo* Mann a few steps further, the director appears to have put a lot of thought into what effect the format has on the viewer. The perception of the video image as being closer to reality than film is something the director deliberately appeals to, employing it to draw the audience closer to the events portrayed. Miike's style on *Visitor* Q is deliberately aimed at involving the viewer, something he does not just through the use of digital video, but also several other methods, which we will come to later.

The film as a whole is very consistent, stylistically as well as thematically. The tool of exaggeration, in Dead or *Alive* limited to the last ten minutes, is steadfastly applied here to the theme of the family unit. In an interesting break with his own tradition, Miike approaches this theme in reverse order, starting at the point of disintegration in order to build it back up again.

Visitor Q's protagonists the Yamazakis are a completely disintegrated family: daughter Miki (Fujiko) is a runaway who prostitutes herself in the big city, son Takuya (Jun Mutô) is bullied by a group of classmates and takes his frustration out on his mother Keiko (Shungiku Uchida), who turns to heroin for solace and also plays prostitute to be able to afford her habit. Father Kiyoshi (Kenichi Endô) is anything but a head of the family. A total underachiever, he is useless at his job, his role as a father and as a man.

It's an obviously exaggerated picture but despite its potentially sensationalist elements, the film is anything but exploitative.The characters and their actions are always motivated and the most fundamental reason for this family's structure is the roles adopted by the parents. They have conformed *in extremis* to the roles they are expected to fulfil, those of the provider (father) and the domestic caretaker (mother). Their devotion to their duties have become excuses for not having to face emotions and feelings. In fact this devotion has repressed all emotion. When his wife is beaten before his eyes by his own son, dad doesn't give the slightest reaction and continues eating his dinner. Mom, moments after being punched through a wall, crawls up to serve seconds, limping off to the kitchen with an obligatory smile on her face. Both of them have grown completely accustomed to keeping up appearances, to the outside world, to each other and to themselves.

The father's devotion to work is nothing but a facade. Although he leaves the house every morning and comes back at night, he has taken leave of his job ever since a particularly shameful incident: employed as a reporter for a TV news program, he was working on his pet project, a report on "youth today" (a deeply ironic choice, given his inability to communicate with his own children). Three teenagers he wanted to interview didn't take too kindly to

his catch-all subject, stripped him naked and inserted the microphone up his rectum while the camera roiled. He never told his family about the incident or the mandatory leave of absence he had to take after showing the footage to his superiors (it's indicative of his personality that he would show his humiliation to his colleagues but keep it a secret from his family).

Of all the characters in the film, the father is the biggest failure, a character who gave' up being a father for a devotion to work, but who failed at the very thing he devoted himself to. His job is his last vestige and he tries to reclaim it desperately. The way he does this ties in with his failure as a father: he turns his camera on his own children. This is the only instance he directly and intentionally relates to his children, but he's only able to do it through the excuse of work.This throws up a safe barrier between himself and his feelings, the presence of the camera allowing him to keep 'professional' distance. Since they are just his subjects, he can safely relate to his children without having to feel emotions for them.

The film's opening scene sees him continuing his exploration of "youth today" when he visits his own estranged daughter at work. In a hotel room he questions her about her job as a prostitute, but like the brats that humiliated him, Miki lets him experience what he wants to know rather than telling him: the two end up having sex together. This being the opening scene, it establishes a multitude of aspects about the character of Kiyoshi Yamazaki, not the least of which is his incompetence. He forgets to turn off the camera when he and Miki have sex, something mirrored several scenes later in the footage of his humiliation. The sex scene with Miki also establishes his failure as a father, since the opening text 'Have you ever done it with your dad?" indicates that the girl he's having sex with is his daughter. Thirdly, the scene establishes his failure at his most basic function: that of being a man. Harking back to *Full Metal Gokudô* (but without offering the character the chance to redeem himself), Kiyoshi is useless in bed. His daughter tells him his dick is too small (the defining? characteristic of failed masculinity in Miike's films), and derides him for the fact that he climaxes within a matter of seconds (referring to the *sex* scene in *Jingi Naki Yabô 2).* He also keeps his socks on during sex.

The moment after his orgasm is also the moment in the film when he is at his most vulnerableandmost intouchwith his own emotions. "This is wrong," he mutters where moments earlier he was yelling: "This is great!" When his daughter starts calling him "early bird" for his lack of longevity, he immediately retreats behind the facade of work again and starts asking her questions about the details of her job. He pays her for her services, but can't afford her asking price (another failure).

The whole episode with his daughter is a failure in itself and he drops the idea of making a documentary about "youth today". Instead he finds a new subject in his son Takuya. On his way to 'work! he stumbles upon his son being bullied by three classmates. He pulls out his camera and films it from a distance, feeling he's stumbled onto the perfect subject for a new report that could get him back his job. Here too, the father can only relate to his child through the mask of work. When he films Takuya. he zooms in on his face, a kind of closeness he could never achieve in direct communication.

Kiyoshi pitches this new idea for a report on the bullying of his own son to the presenter of the news program, Asako (Shôko Nakahara), who walks away in disgust when he promotes it with the remark: "It can't get more real than this." This remark is as ironic as his previous subject "youth today", since he hasn't got a clue about the reality of his son's situation. However, his description for his new idea is: "a bullied son and his father", which

Father and son Yamazaki (Kenichi Endô, l., and Jun Mutô).

implies the presence of a relationship between father and son, and therefore indicates the existence of some parental awareness on Kiyoshi's part. But again, he is only able to acknowledge the existence of this relationship because it comes in the guise of work.

The fact that Takuya is bullied and doesn't fight back creates a parallel between the characters of father and son. The son is as much a weakling as his father, but he responds to it in a different way, by bullying his mother in turn. As a child, he doesn't have the duty of work to devote himself to, and instead adopts the nearest available model for releasing his frustrations, which is the behaviour of his own classmates. He's allowed to do this because, as previously noted, his mother and father have lost touch with the emotional side of being parents and focus only on the duties they are expected to fulfil in those roles. Duty is stronger than the need for self-protection.

This parallel between father and son is also present between mother and daughter. The fact that they are both prostitutes is visually reinforced in the scene in which Keiko receives a middle-aged man as a client. This scene also takes place in a hotel room and the placing of the camera in a corner of the room is, although objective, reminiscent of the presence of the father's video camera in the opening scene. Despite being an objective, third person perspective, the single-take, fixed shot feels as directly confrontational as the subjective camera in the earlier scene. This similarity in the impact of the objective and the subjective camera is a good example of Miike's stylistic approach to the film, which we'll go into in more detail later.

The money Keiko makes (which is less than a third of what her daughter charged her husband) she spends immediately on drugs, which she buys from a dealer in a playground. Her behaviour on the streets is telling for her willingness to keep up appearances. Neatly dressed like the average conservative, middle-aged mother / housewife, she tries her best to hide the limp caused by Takuya's beatings and carries a smile which immediately evaporates the moment she thinks no one can see her.

Left The visitor (Kazushi Watanabe, I.) invites himself.
Right: Daughter Miki (Fujiko)

The method through which the reunification of this seemingly lost family is achieved is through the introduction of a foreign element: a young man who bashes the father on the head with a rock, then brings him home pretending to help him and staying around to spend time with the family. It's a method that is very reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini's Theorem, minus the Marxist political motivations. Although as Dyonisian as Terence Stamp's godlike stranger, the visitor (Kazushi Watanabe) here brings happiness to madness, rather than the other way around. This difference indicates that Miike is not out to condemn or chastise his characters or what they represent, despite their obvious status as representatives of social phenomena. With the introduction of the visitor, Miike allows them to achieve their happiness and it's precisely because of this that the film cannot properly be termed social criticism, since the element of condemnation is missing.

The happiness these characters find is a very fundamental happiness that stems from inside themselves and from the ones they love. This is different from the happiness brought by the bags of money in Rainy Dog, *Ley* Lines and *The City* of Lost Souls, which the director always unmasks as illusory. Miike is more kind to the characters of Visitor Q- who have destroyed each other's lives but find the strength within themselves to restore their unity -than to those who think their happiness lies in quick fortune.

The visitor's own method of bringing happiness is making the characters (particularly the parents) realise what they have repressed and to show them the ecstasy that lies within the acknowledgement and the rediscovery of their true emotions. The parallel with Pasolini's film lies in confronting the characters with ecstasy, hence the Dyonisian nature of both characters.

He reawakens the mothers femininity and maternal instinct (which go hand-in-hand), appealing to a source that was created when Keiko smelled her daughter's scent on her husbands penis, the night after Kiyoshi had sex with Miki. (Her stare immediately after this at the shapeless, dried-up herbal face mask she wore that afternoon, suggests that for a brief moment she realises that she is as much a hollow shell as that mask.)

Upon returning home from servicing her middle-aged client and buying heroin, Keiko is lured by a trail of puzzle pieces that lead into Miki's room (puzzling is her only hobby, and the first shot of her in the film depicted her making a puzzle before Takuya threw it onto the ground). The trail ends at a photograph of her daughter, the discovery of which appeals to the emotion she felt when smelling her husbands dick.The visitor is sitting on the bed, framed

in a very significant composition: in the foreground is the picture of Miki, with the visitor right behind it in the background. Sitting on the bed in front of the window, he is only silhouette, an outline instead of an individual. The combination with Miki's picture and the mother's re-awakening maternal instincts makes his faceless shape a surrogate for the missing child.

When Keiko sits down on the bed, he puts his arms around her, takes off her clothes and begins squeezing her breasts. His actions are not sexual in connotation, there is no kissing and no advance towards intercourse. By reaching for her breasts he reaches for her femininity and maternity. Tellingly, Keiko's first reaction is fear, since he puts her in touch with something she has denied for a long time. But it quickly dissipates when she realises the feeling is good. Milk begins to drip from her nipples, then starts to squirt out as the feelings of ecstasy in Keiko increase. The mother's milk soon flies across the room, covering Miki's picture to symbolise the mother's rediscovery of her maternal instincts.

Keiko's liberation has its effect on the family. That night at dinner she is more diligent than ever, not out of a sense of duty, but out of love for her family. Now she serves seconds because she cares, not because she is obliged to (a difference that is expressed very well in Uchida's performance). When Takuya throws a cup of hot tea at her, she throws back a knife which only just misses him. It's the first,time she has ever resisted her son's aggression.

The source that the visitor can appeal to in the father announces itself moments later. Takuya's classmates attack the family homestead with fireworks and Kiyoshi films the assault for his documentary. Providing narration for his recordings, he says: "I don't know how I should feel. What do we think of this wonderful bullying?" This expresses his lack of emotion, but at the same time an attempt to find that emotion. After the acknowledgement witnessed by the name of his documentary "A bullied son and his father", he now openly wonders how he should feel. He is not ready to find the answer yet, but the same exclamation holds the key for the visitor, since it expresses the fathers excitement about his documentary and stumbling upon such great material for it.

The visitor stimulates this enthusiasm by helping the father with his work. Kiyoshi invites Asako to feature in his report. As his son is being bullied further down the road, he instructs his colleague to walk up to the scene and interfere. After this Kiyoshi himself will walk in to stop them and answer Asako's questions about his feelings. This is a clear indication that Kiyoshi is ready to face those feelings, he wants to be confronted with it, but his plan is only possible because the visitor is carrying the camera instead of Kiyoshi himself.

Asako again reacts in disgust and walks away. Kiyoshi runs after her, grabs her and angrily begins to slap her around, asking "Is it because I come too early?" He says he'll prove to her that he can do it "long and hard", beats her down and strips off her clothes. The way he mistreats Asako is, far from being a gratuitous rape scene, another parallel between father and son. Now it's the father who imitates the behaviour of the son, venting his sexual frustrations on Asako the way Takuya releases his own anger on his mother.

When Kiyoshi accidentally strangles her in his rage, he takes her home and deposits her corpse in the garden greenhouse. He sends the visitor (who has been filming throughout with Kiyoshi's consent) into the house to fetch some garbage bags, then continues to mark the parts of Asako's body that he intends to cut off for easier disposal. He discovers that he becomes aroused by the sight of her naked body, then turns to the camera and says he finally discovered the feeling he couldn't acknowledge before: a desire to have sex. If this is what he repressed, then he has been denying himself since his children were born.

The moment when being a parent became more important than being a lover, he conformed to his duty and repressed his desires. The choice to make him rediscover a desire for sex (which he will then naturally act upon because realisation equals liberation) instead of a random other emotion is therefore anything but exploitative. It's quite the opposite: being true to the character and to the film's theme. It also delivers the motivation for his decision earlier in the film to have sex with his daughter, which was acting on his own repressed desires without realising he had those desires – hence his feeling afterwards that he had done something wrong. Now that he is in touch with his desire, he is freed of that guilt. As a result he strips off and with great enthusiasm has sex with Asako's dead body.

Kiyoshi's liberation does not make him an entirely different person. As the sex scene with Asako's corpse shows, he is still a failure in every respect. The scene emphasises this more than any previous moment in the film, because it first builds up his confidence to provide contrast. When he threatens to climax early again, he persists and manages to control himself. Then he thinks Asako has become wet as a result of him fucking her. When he reaches down to feel, he discovers that it's not her wetness, but faeces that are involuntarily being excreted from her body. This moment is the strongest assault on the father's masculinity. At a moment when he feels more confident and more masculine than ever before (the discovery of his desires, avoiding premature ejaculation and the belief that his sexual prowess has excited a dead woman), the realisation that her wetness is actual fact excrement is a total disillusionment. It's the complete opposite of what he expects and another in a long line of digs at his masculinity. After being anally penetrated, having a small penis, coming too early, being unable to maintain order in his house and failing at his job, he is now made to look ridiculous by a dead woman. Even more so when he becomes stuck inside her at the moment rigor mortis sets in.

However, Kiyoshi's lowest ebb is also the start of reunification with his wife. When he gets stuck, he calls to his wife for help, and its her heroin (which had become useless as a result of the visitor's intervention) that frees him from his predicament. A skilfully placed injection shrinks Kiyoshi's manliness back to its regular size and it pops out (literally, since Miike added an exaggerated popping sound to the soundtrack). As he watches his wife's dedication, Kiyoshi remarks to the visitor (who is still filming) that she hasn't been this reliable since they got married. But while he was in the garden having his way with Asako's corpse, Keikowas inside the house showing thevisitor how she had learned to make her breasts squirt by herself. The fact that she's able to do this without help gives her even greater ecstasy than before, resulting in a kitchen floor covered in a mixture of breast milk and vaginal fluids.

The couple complete their reunification when they take revenge on the boys who bully their son. Their first collaborative act in years, they kill the teenage tyrants with glee, then together work out a way to dispose of all the dead bodies. This also serves to bring Takuya back to normal. Because he is no longer bullied and has no frustration left to vent, his relationship to his mother automatically changes. The visitor finds him in the kitchen, face down in the breast milk. The boy says that he thought the visitor had come to destroy their family. It's a remark that reveals the Oedipal nature of his bullying – he witnessed the moment the visitor helped his mother rediscover herself and felt jealousy, which he expressed when he threw hot tea at his mother that night over dinner and yelled What's going on here?" Now, back to being his mother's son, Takuya thanks the stranger and says that with university entrance exams coming up, he will devote himself to his studies.

The visitor helps Keiko Yamazaki (Shungiku Uchiia) rediscover her femininity.

After the boy's resolution, the visitor leaves the family. He runs into Miki on the streets and is accosted by her with the offer of a discount on her services. He replies by picking up a rock from the ground. While we don't see him hit her, the next shot is of Miki returning to the family homestead with a bruised face. She goes into her room and through the window sees her mother sitting in the greenhouse. Her father is sucking quietly on one of Keiko's lactating breasts. Moments later Miki approaches and joins in.

This final scene is interesting for two reasons. The symbol of the family's re-unification around the nurturing love of the mother is clear, but the fact that the father drinks from the breasts that are meant for the children also serves as the final confirmation of his ineptitude. His wife is stronger than him and he willingly reverts to the position of a child in her presence. He has recognised and accepted his failures and is able to live with them.

The other interesting aspect of the final scene is the absence of the son. Takuya is not present and no explanation is given for this. That the son should be missing from the reunification suggests that he has left the house, that his happiness lies in becoming a solitary man and in leaving childhood and the family behind. But while the son is allowed to go, the daughter must come back. She essentially reverts to the childhood she once ran away from and rediscovers innocence (as shown by her hugging a teddy bear moments after she returns to her old room). When the daughter leaves the house, she's a runaway. When the son does the same thing, he's a man – an odd, off-balance conclusion given the film's emphasis on failed masculinity.

Before and after: The visitor meets Miki. and Sends her back home.

Visitor Q contains plenty of potentially offensive elements. Viewer reactions were strong when the film played film festivals and received official releases around the world. But these strong reactions are not so much the direct result of the film's contents, but of Its style. It's not what is shown as much as how it's shown. As noted, Miike deliberately involves the viewer, without ever attempting to make them more than spectators. It does not try to, make its audience feel guilty or turn them into accomplices. In fact, the director's approach emphasises the audience's role as observers, by reducing the distance between them and the film. He does this through several means:

- **The use of digital video.** Born out of budgetary restrictions, this limitation is turned into a virtue through the very deliberate employment of the perception of video images as depicting things that are closer to reality than film. The use of subjective points of view emphasises this, immediately from the film's opening scene. The first shot of *Visitor Q* is the view through Kiyoshi's camera, after which the scene alternates between subjective and objective points of view. Since both are shot with digital video, the viewer eventually loses track of which is which, resulting in every shot becoming potentially subjective. This is maintained for the entire duration of the film, since the father (and in the end the visitor) keeps using his video camera, giving Miike the opportunity to keep interjecting subjective viewpoints.
- **Framing.** Particularly with shots inside the house, the camera is placed in hallways, just outside the room where the action is taking place, or with a blank wall filling half the frame and the action tilling the rest. This gives the objective shots the suggestion of subjectivity, since the camera is placed in such a position to create the illusion that theviewerispeekingaroundacornerinto the characters'lives. Like Yasujirô Ozu's famed preference for a camera placement that recreated the point of view of someone sitting on the *tatami*-matted floor, which placed the viewer among the members of the

family, here we are placed in the position of someone peeping on the family. Like the use of subjective camera, this creates a strongly voyeuristic feel.

- **Characters looking and speaking directly into the camera.** This happens in both subjective and objective shots, creating the feeling of the characters directly addressing the viewer.
- **The use of title cards.** Consisting of direct, almost confrontational questions like: "Have you ever done it with your dad?" "Have you ever been hit on the head?" and "Have you ever hit your mom?", these title cards directly address the audience. All three shown in the first ten minutes of the film, they immediately grab the viewer's attention, much like immediately starting with a subjective point of view does.

It's the combination of these stylistic tools that minimises the distance between the viewer and the film, and which as a result provoke such strong reactions.

This should not be confused with manipulating the audience, however. Miike does not try to dictate an opinion or emotion to the viewer. Despite the fact that the viewer is close, he remains objective and is given the freedom to form his or her own opinion. The voyeuristic nature of the camera placements doesn't change this. It's a paradox, but the subjective camera can be objectively employed. Visitor Q shows how.

in which Takeshi kills the rapist is set in a large, revolving industrial elevator, and when the shooting is interrupted by the young nurse Rie (Yoko Natsuki) stumbling onto the scene, Miike bathes her in bright light that blends with her uniform to create an overwhelmingly white image. Rie becomes an almost angelic appearance, which makes the fact that Takeshi instantly falls in love with her completely believable.

The digital video format also allowed the director to experiment freely with digital post-production effects, adding not only his trademark scratches to flashbacks (as in the opening scene of the mother's rape), but also grain, distortion and superimpositions, and making intentionally artificial use of blue screens and composite shots. All of this trickery is done with little consideration for function and the symbiosis between form and content apparent in Miike's preceding films *Visitor Q*, Dead or *Alive 2* and *The City* of Lost Souls is achieved here on only one occasion: the introduction of Rie as described above. However, the visual experimentations Miike undertakes in Family not only follow on the work he did with Naosuke Imaizumi on *MPD-Psycho,* they also had an influence on later, more subtle use of image manipulation in *Ichi the Killer, Dead* of *Alive* – *Final* and *Sabu.*

Where the director completely misses the mark in terms of style is in his use of music. The entire soundtrack was performed by the Japanese metal band Monkey Pirates and their relentlessly loud songs indiscriminately accompany action, dialogue and even love scenes. The pounding score hammers home how exciting the proceedings are meant to be, but the monotonous metal grows just as repetitive as the uninspired action sequences.

The sixth partnership between writerand director, *Family* offers the proof that the collaborations with Hisao Maki are dissonances in Miike's oeuvre. Although the director has been accused of delivering little more than sensationalist exploitation as a result of films like like *Fudoh, Dead or Alive, Visitor Q* and *Ichi the Killer,* the only occasions he has delivered pure sensationalism have been the Hisao Maki films. Their deplorable results suggest that exploitation and sensationalism are not Miike's forte.

THE GUYS FROM PARADISE

Tengoku Kara Kita Otoko-Tachi

2001

The Guys *from Paradise* marks a return to *The Bird People* in China's theme of cultural rootlessness. At first sight a prison scare story in the vein of Alan Parker's *Midnight Express,* closer inspection reveals a film that goes beyond the stage of culture clash, suggesting new ways for two cultures to integrate.

In this, the film is an extrapolation of earlier themes rather than a retelling. Just as *Rainy* Dog expanded upon the Taiwan scenes of *Shinjuku Triad Society* and *The Bird People in China* in turn expanded upon *Rainy Dog, The Guys from Paradise* further develops *The Bird People in China's* handling of the stranger in a strange land. The film could in fact be seen as a conclusion of Miike's exploration of the theme of cultural rootlessness, relating it to issues raised in other recent films like *Visitor Q.* The result is a film that can almost entirely be read as a metaphor for the relationship between Japan and its Asian neighbours.

As in *The Bird People in China,* the protagonist here is a successful young *salary-man,* Kôhei Hayasaka (Kôji Kikkawa, whose stilted performance is sadly lacking in subtlety). Kôhei is arrested during a business trip to the Philippines for possession of one kilogram of heroin. Aside from his insistence that he is innocent, the film provides no background on the

circumstances of the crime or the arrest. When we first meet him, Kohei is already on his way to prison. But such information is unnecessary here, because the film is paradoxically not a prison drama. Serving as a great example of Miike's position towards genre, The *Guys from Paradise* does not adhere to the rules and expectations of the prison film, doesn't build up tension concerning Kôhei's fate (we learn early on that his is a hopeless case) and has no one secretly drawing up elaborate escape plans. Quite the opposite, as soon as Kohei joins shady Japanese criminal Yoshida (Tsutomu Yamazaki), he is free to conduct business outside prison walls any time he pleases.

He is allowed this curious luxury because he is Japanese. Upon his arrival he is ushered through the filthy, overcrowded corridors of the prison compound to a quieter section populated only by a trio of Japanese inmates: Sakamoto (Far-Long-Oh), a former physician from Nagoya sentenced for paedophilia; Uno (Kenichi Endô), a man who schemed his ex-wife out of her family fortune to start a Japanese restaurant with his Philippino girlfriend; and Philippine Tarô (Kenji Mizuhashi), of whom no one knows his history or real name. Their cell has coffee, tea and Japanese newspapers and magazines. Kôhei is charged 200 pesos a month in rent for the privilege, but told that as an employee of a big company he should be free in no time.

It's with this position of privilege that the film expands upon *The Bird People in China*. In the 1997 film, protagonist Wada had to leave luxury behind him as he moved into an increasingly primitive environment. For Kohei, even though he feels like he's been thrown into misery at the deep end, in a relative sense nothing has changed. Particularly from the moment he hooks up with Yoshida, the system inside the prison is little different from what he was used to on the outside. He has a safe haven (previously Japan, now the Japanese section of the jail) from which he can move out into the world *to* conduct business. Since part of his business was bribing local politicians, his new career in drug trafficking and buying off the warden isn't such a big change.

As this comparison shows, the structure of the prison, with its secluded island of luxury that shields the Japanese inmates from a more primitive and hostile environment, works as a metaphor for Asia and Japan's privileged, isolated position in relation to its economically less prosperous neighbours, with the word "paradise" in the film's title indicating exactly how privileged it is.

Despite the advantages of his special Japanese cell, Kôhei is greatly distressed by his situation. For a man who walked into detention in a suit and tie and carrying a big suitcase (the variety with the convenient little wheels), eating crow and boiling your rice with polluted water is quite a radical change of lifestyle. He can't count on any of the luxuries he's used to at home. "Nerd studied too much," Tarô yells when it becomes clear that Kohei doesn't even know how to cook rice. The water gives Kôhei diarrhoea, but when he sees and smells the stomach-churning state of the communal toilet he prefers to wait. While he recoils, Tarô slips past him and uses it without hesitation.

The extent of Kôhei's devotion to luxury is illustrated very well when his wife Miyuki (Mai Oikawa) and his colleague Sugimori (Kazuhiko Kaneyama) visit him for the first time. "Look at me!" he barks in tortured self-pity when they ask him how he's holding up. Dressed in a tank top and a pair of khakis he looks at the very worst unfashionable. This scene creates the clearest parallel between Kohei and *Bird People's* Wada through their narcissism that has resulted from luxury.

Left: Kôhei (Kôji Kikkawa) is back in his suit. ready to start working with Yoshida (Tsutomu Yamazaki).
Right: Philippine Tarô (Kenji Mizuhashi) goes ape during a kitchen brawl.

It's telling that what persuades Kôhei to join Yoshida is the offer to use the big shot's private (and clean) toilet. Yoshida lives in even greater luxury than the other Japanese prisoners, in his own spacious studio with a Philippino girlfriend named Belia. "If you pay, anything's possible in here. That's why I work hard," he explains his position to the newcomer. The young businessman's willingness to be adopted into Yoshida's circle is also the result of the lack of support he receives from the home front. When Sugimori brings him a local lawyer, Kohei is told that the only way out of a permanent conviction is to bribe certain officials. But his company makes no effort to help him and sends only obligatory words of support, He suggests selling their apartment to raise the money but his wife refuses, saying her father was already demoted as a result of Kohei being in prison. Kôhei sees a procession of Japanese lawyers, all of whom prove spectacularly incompetent. (In a rather ill-conceived montage played entirely for laughs, he lets four potential candidates state their cases, but the quartet is entirely clueless. One of the four is played Mitsuhiro Oikawa, Kikkawa's co-star in The City of Lost Souls, who self-referentially talks about an island of monkeys and even pulls out a ping-pong bat. Another part consists of an indulgent and incongruous piece of clowning by Naoto Takenaka as a deaf solicitor.)

Within moments of accepting Yoshida's offer, Kôhei is in his suit again and finds himself outside prison gates, on his way to a hotel to exchange a bag and its contents. He seizes the opportunity to flee, but Kohei finds Yoshida waiting for him outside his wife's hotel. Learning that Miyuki has checked out of her room, he grows suspicious and tests her by asking her to retrieve the one million dollars he has stashed away. Corporate bribe money intended for a candidate in the country's upcoming presidential elections, Kohei hid it in the freezer of his favourite Japanese restaurant in Manila, telling the owner it's a supply of Japanese steaks. Believing in his fellow inmates' opinion that he would quickly be released, he had resisted using it for his own purposes.

Left: Kôhei returns from one of his errands for Yoshida.
Right: Money buys everything, even a trip to the seaside for a convicted drug dealer.

He asks Miyuki to pick it up alone and not tell Sugimori, then use it to get him out of jail. As he expected, she doesn't go alone and brings hiscolleaguewith hertocollectthemoney. Watching them from a distance, he realises that he has lost his wife. Miike at first gives Kohei and the viewer a glimmer of hope by having only Miyuki descend from the arriving car, but a few seconds later Sugimori gets out as well. The separation was foreshadowed early on in the film, in a symbolic scene that showed Tarô masturbating over Kôhei's picture of Miyuki. Kohei tries to grab it from him, but it's already too late. The glob of semen that covers her face in the picture, which Tarô equally symbolically tore in two to get rid of Kôhei's likeness, functions as an omen of their impending separation.

Planned by Kohei to test his wife's fidelity, the incident with the money forms his farewell to his old life. He leaves his period of luxury behind and embraces the primitive, becoming fully embroiled with Yoshida's schemes. This turning point is emphasised by Kohei receiving a life sentence from the court. He could have used the US$1 million to buy himself free, but doesn't. He has turned his back on his old life and won't go back. He has nothing to go back to: no wife, no job and no friends. The group unit he forms with Yoshida and the other Japanese prisoners is his family now and in this respect the life sentence he receives is very significant. By accepting his new life, he has already voluntarily sentenced himself. Compare this to earlier in the film when he felt complete desperation, at which time he expected to receive the death penalty. The sentence reflects Kôhei's state of mind in both cases.

He also grows closer to Namie (Nene Ôtsuka), a female Japanese inmate from the nearby women's compound. Jailed for embezzlement, she was betrayed by her partner, a common fate that creates a bond between her and Kohei.

Kôhei's new life immediately receives a trial by fire, literally, when he and Yoshida run into the yakuza Yabumoto (Toshiyuki Kitami), who has been tracking Yoshida for the last five years. (Yabumoto is a variation on Tomorowo Taguchi's character in Rainy Dog, a man

whose dogged pursuit in an alien environment has resulted in a few loose screws – as illustrated in a somewhat overstated manner when he drinks his own semen after masturbating in a bathtub.) It turns out Yoshida's real name is Murakami and that he is a simple conman instead of the top-ranking yakuza he made himself out to be. He hid in the prison voluntarily in the hope of evading the gangsters he scammed.

Yabumoto's gang open fire on the two men and Yoshida drives off in his car, leaving Kôhei behind to fend for himself. Kôhei is saved by fellow stray convict Brando (Monsour Del Rosario, a character who is set up as the token prison heavy but who refreshingly emerges as an, albeit enigmatically motivated, ally) and returns to the jail later that same night to return the money. The fact that he does this illustrates his devotion to his new life and his group, who were suspecting him of having run off again.

Now Yabumoto knows of Yoshida's hideout, he bribes a prison guard to assassinate the conman. As the guard pulls out a gun, a lightning strike causes a blackout and Yoshida's girlfriend Belia grabs the opportunity to stab the assailant. She succeeds, but is shot dead herself as a result. This is the first member of the group who dies and in keeping with Miike's handling of the theme of the group unit this forms the beginning of their downfall. Yoshida wants to flee and asks the warden to release all Japanese prisoners. His request is denied, even after he offers money. At that same moment a knife-wielding inmate attacks Kohei. Tarô comes to his aid, but is stabbed himself. When Kohei grabs the knife and goes after him, the attacker drums up a mob of Philippino prisoners and a riot ensues pitting the handful of Japanese against several dozen locals. They escape with the help of Brando and flee in the same bus that brought them to the jail. Yoshida has no choice but to leave the fortune he amassed with the warden, meaning they have no money.

Kohei tells them about the one million dollars he hid, which immediately brightens the group's spirits. These are quickly dampened again when they find that the money and the owner of the restaurant have vanished. The blackout, which hit the wide area surrounding the prison, caused the freezer to defrost. The owner, wanting to conserve Kôhei's 'steaks' by cooking them, discovered what was really inside the package. Simultaneously, Uno discovers his girlfriend, who he'd wanted to bring with him, in the arms of another man and kills both of them.

For all the characters, this moment constitutes a break with their previous lives. However well adapted they may have been to life in the primitive Philippines, their main drive was still making money, in other words the Japanese attitude. Reworking the point made about money and happiness in Rainy *Dog, Ley Lines* and The City of *Lost* Souls, their farewell to money means the start of true happiness for the members of the group, with each of them growing to the peak of their respective powers and abilities, and Kohei and Namie consummating their relationship. When they find a wounded child in the road that night, Sakamoto operates on her in the nearby village. The procedure is such a success that he finds himself helping all the children in the town. Meanwhile, Uno restores the village's electricity and Tan3 starts an uninterrupted period of fasting and praying that results in the villagers regarding him as a god.

When Yabumoto's band of thugs traces their steps and starts shooting up the village, Sakamoto tries to protect the children but is killed. When Yabumoto holds Kohei, Namie and Yoshida at gunpoint, Uno jumps in front and catches the gang's bullets. Kohei shoots Yabumoto while Uno's seeming invincibility (he is riddled with bullets but remains standing,

Kôhei and Sakamoto (Far-Long Oh) try to save the wounded Taro from an angry mob of Philippino prisoners

reciting a message of love to the girlfriend he just murdered) scares off the gangster's hench-men. The moment they run away, Uno drops to the ground and dies.

The denouement, which is shot as a report for Japanese TV, sees Tarô staying in the village, worshipped by the locals (a very cliched image that takes the aspect of the primitive a step too far). He finds a treasure that was buried in the village during World War II by the Japanese admiral Yamashita, but donates it to the Red Cross. Kôhei and Namie go back to Manila, joined by Yoshida. Under the name of Juan Mabini, Kôhei enters the presidential elections, running against the man he was once supposed to bribe and winning. Joining in his victory parade are Namie, Yoshida and Brando.

This is watched with astonishment by Sugimoto back in Japan. Here Miike creates a juxtaposition that sums up the film's intention. Kôhei reaches new heights after embracing

the influence of primitive Asia, while Sugimoto and Miyuki are now living a routine married life. He watches TV while she grudgingly vacuums the floor and their little son plays his Game Soy. Sugimoto thinks he recognises Kohei in the report but Miyuki can't even be bothered to turn around and have a look. He changes the channel, shrugging his shoulders at the possibility that Mabini might indeed have been Kohei and finding more interest in a variety show.

The film's ending could be interpreted as being neo-imperialist in tone. After all, a Japanese becomes the ruler of the Philippines. While this would seem to be almost undeniable on the surface, there is more nuance to the scene than meets the eye. The message of the film is that resisting the lure of money and economic success can make a person stronger than he or she thought possible. Applied to the metaphor supplied by the prison, this would mean that if Japan embraced its own primitive – in other words Asian – roots, instead of repressing them in its hunger for economic growth, then it would become even stronger as a nation instead of staying locked in a vicious circle of duty and frustration

This certainly reeks of neo-imperialist thought, but the truth is that Kohei as a character has chosen the road of understanding rather than that of dominance. He doesn't conquer and impose, he adapts, as witnessed by him changing his name and allowing his real name to be turned into the mispronounced nickname Koppei. He becomes a pan-Asian being who is no longer just Japanese, a man at complete peace with his rootlessness, in whom cultures unite rather than collide. He is what all of Miike's rootless outcasts strive to become.

The presence of imperialism in this film is not in the final scene but in the beginning. It is Japan's old way, the way of money, the belief that anyone and anything can be bought. After all, Kohei was sent to the Philippines to bribe a presidential candidate, whose name very appropriately is Mascardo – the mask behind which hides foreign influence. Like Brando at one point tells Kohei: "You Japanese are stupid. You try to solve everything with money, but you get caught by the slightest trap." This failure is what the film is about, like admiral Yamashita's gold that he himself never got to use. He was the imperialist, not Kohei and his group, who donate it to the Red Cross.

Following on Visitor Q's denunciation of slavish devotion to duty, *The Guys from Paradise* combines this with the anti-capitalist element present in Rainy Dog, Ley *Lines* and *The City of* Lost Souls The resulting stance Miike would employ again the following year in The *Happiness of the Katakuris.*

ICHI THE KILLER

Koroshiya Ichi

2001

If one thingstandsoutabout ***Ichi the Killer,*** it'sthefilm'sextremelyviolentcontent and thestrong reactions this provoked from audiences and critics alike. Based on a manga by Hideo Yamamoto (not to be confused with the cinematographer of the same name, who also worked on this film), *Ichi the Killer* has been dismissed as exploitative, misogynist, indulgent and as simply an example of pushing the envelope to see how far one film (and one filmmaker) can go in the depiction of violence.,

In reality, the film echoes Miike's work on Visitor Q, whose seemingly exploitative surface hid strong characterisations, a very deliberate and conscious deployment of style to appeal to the viewer, and an exploration-of the relationship between the viewer and the image. In Ichi this appeal goes a step further in addressing the audience, provoking reflection on the viewer's consumption of moving images, particularly images of violence.

It's a paradox, but *Ichi the Killer,* a film that sets new boundaries in the portrayal of violence and bloodshed, takes a strongly critical stance towards the portrayal and the consumption of the violent image. However, it does so without ever taking a moral stance towards either the portrayal or the consumption, thus circumventing any accusations of hypocrisy on the part of the director. Miike does not moralise or chastise, but provokes the audience into questioning their own attitudes towards viewing images of violence. He steers them into a direction but leaves it up to them to draw their own conclusion.

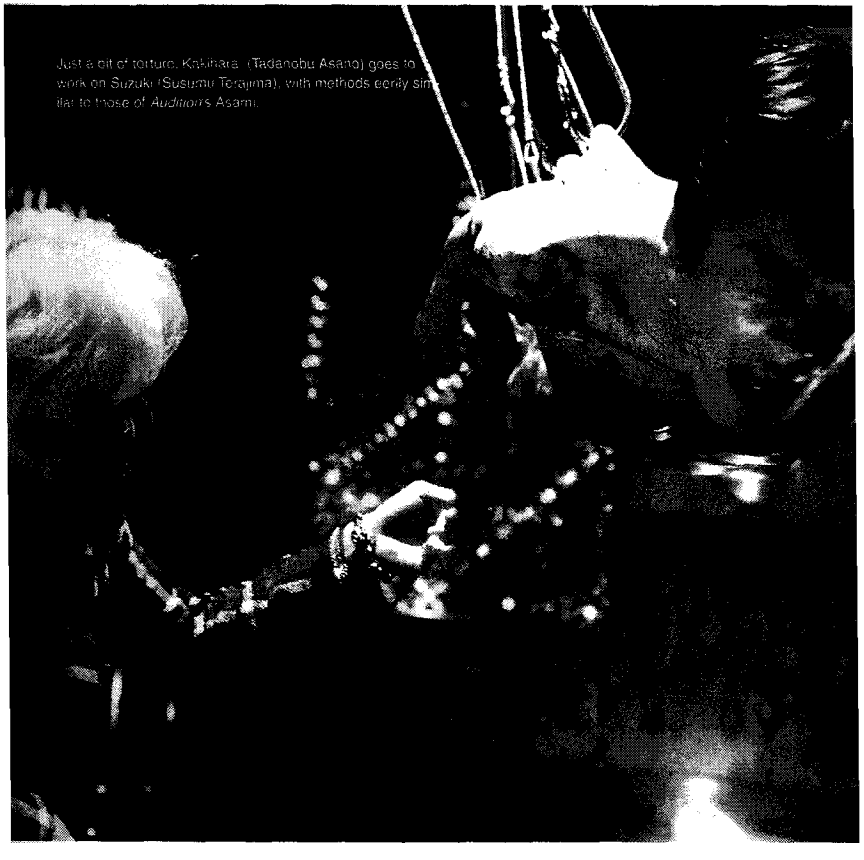
Miike's intentions pervade the film on every level, in form as much as in content. Characterisation is a crucial tool in this respect, but the characters are so well drawn, developed and motivated that for the most part even regarded purely as a character study, *Ichi the Killer* works rather well. If we look at the film in this way, we notice that the narrative again follows Miike's regular thematic process faithfully, combining two main strands from previous films: *MPD-Psycho's* theme of mental rootlessness (in the shape of the titular killer who is the subject of mind control through hypnotic suggestion) and *Audition's* theme of the search for happiness in an ideal partner.

Protagonist Kakihara (Tadanobu Asano) is the person doing the searching here. Like *Audition's* Aoyama he has lost the person he loves, who in this case is the boss of the Anjo yakuza group to whom he served as main lieutenant. Instead of the homosexual relationship this would at first glance appear to be, the bond between the two men is based on pain as much as love: masochist Kakihara found in Anjo the sadist who could fulfil his every desire, as witnessed by the scars that cover his face. Their relationship was so ideal (the fact that aside from one brief glimpse from the back Anjo is never seen adds to the near-mythical status he holds in Kakihara's eyes) that Anjo's death has left Kakihara with no one to satisfy his need. As top lieutenant in one of the most powerful crime syndicates in Shinjuku, he is now a masochist with no one to hurt him.

In effect, the death of Anjo has made Kakihara rootless, unable to be what he truly is. This rootless state is expressed in two ways: first in the character's persistent belief that his boss is still alive (the culprits removed his body and cleaned up the crime scene in order to

make it seem like a disappearance), leading him into a determined search for any trace of Anjo's whereabouts. Secondly it's expressed in the fact that during his search Kakihara tortures the people he even slightly suspects of being involved, something he does with glee. The displacement from his true nature has made him the opposite of what he is: he behaves as a sadist instead of a masochist.

The actions he undertakes as a result of becoming rootless inevitably force him into the position of an outcast. After receiving a tip-off, he takes to torturing Suzuki (SusumuTerajima), a lower-ranking member of an affiliate yakuza group. Kakihara suspends him on hooks through his flesh and goes to work on him with needles and boiling oil, until Suzuki's boss (Jun Kunimura) intervenes, furious at Kakihara's actions. Kakihara's method of apology makes the situation even worse. Instead of chopping off the customary pinky, he takes a blade to his own tongue and is quickly expelled from the outfit by godfather Nakazawa (Yoshiki Arizono).



Just a bit of torture. Kakihara (Tadanobu Asano) goes to work on Suzuki (Susumu Terajima), with methods eerily similar to those of *Audition*'s Asami.

Superhero or peeping tom? Introducing Ichi.

Now an outcast, he forms a group unit consisting of former members of the Anjo group who have followed Kakihara out of loyalty for him and their missing boss. They continue the search where Nakazawa had given up and declared their boss dead. The strength of this new unit is tested (and thereby questioned) almost immediately after it's formed. One of the members prefers to leave, but is reigned in by Kakihara with a very persuasive six-inch needle through the foot. Like Ryuichi in *Dead* or *Alive*, Kakihara does not tolerate betrayal to the group and his commanding presence plays perhaps an even bigger part in the individual members' decision to join than their feelings of loyalty or shared fate. But the wish to leave and the punishment that follows are the first blow to the group's ties and herald the disintegration that is to follow in the remainder of the film.

It's fitting that Kakihara's actions rather than loyalty are what holds his group together. For Kakihara himself, loyalty also has little meaning. His loyalty to Anjo is based on the fact that his boss satisfied his desires, not on the hierarchy within the syndicate. Hierarchy, seniority and yakuza rules mean little to Kakihara, as witnessed by his torturing of an ally and the open defiance of his superiors -when he cut off his tongue, the gesture was so grandiosely overstated that it became an insult.

The slicing of his tongue was also a form of masturbation, a temporary fulfilment of Kakihara's own desires.This indicates how Kakihara's only loyalty is to those desires. Later, when he finds irrefutable evidence that Anjo is indeed dead, the search for the killer is not a quest for vengeance, but a search for a replacement sadist. Especially when the assassin continues his slaughter among Kakihara's men, the masochist admires the gruesome results of the killer's handiwork in awe and realises that he has found the person who can

give him the pain he longs for. The irony that Kakihara's new potential lover is the same man who killed his boss and previous lover only serves to illustrate where the protagonist's priorities lie.

There's further irony in the situation since the killer in question, the Ichi of the title (Nao Ômori), is even more of a rootless individual than Kakihara. He is the victim of mind control by his employer Jijii (Shinya Tsukamoto) and has therefore entirely lost his identity. Barely an adult, his immature sexual drives have formed the source for Jijii's manipulation. The hypnotist placed in his mind the false memory of a traumatic event he supposedly witnessed in high school, whereby several bullies raped a girl in front of him and Ichi was not only unable to intervene, he was sexually aroused by the sight of such humiliation and pain inflicted on another human being. The resulting duality between Ichi's hatred of bullies and excitement over the infliction of pain on others is what allows Jijii to manipulate him and use him as little more than a weapon. By associating Ichi's target with the high school bullies, he creates the willingness to intervene, while Ichi's sadism and the excitement it evokes make him a gruesomely effective murderer. Jijii's handling of Ichi is almost mechanical; the young man's loss of identity has gone so far as to rob him of his humanity.

An early scene in the film establishes Ichi's confused personality. After murdering Anjo, he spies on hooker Sailor (Mai Gotô) as she is viciously beaten and then raped by her pimp (Hôka Kinoshita). When a sound betrays Ichi's presence, the pimp comes out to look for the intruder, only to find a fresh glob of semen where Ichi was standing just moments earlier. This scene is later reprised, this time resulting in a confrontation between Ichi and the pimp. Ichi kills the bully (he uses a razor sharp blade in the heel of his left shoe to kill), then turns to Sailor and says: "I'll rape you now, if you want." Judging from these words, it's not rape in itself that upsets Ichi, but the pimp's bullying behaviour. Quite the opposite, Ichi is very happy to take the dead man's place if Sailor wants him to. This is a crucial moment in the definition of the character, since it establishes him as a sadist, not a bully. His proposal to Sailor implies consent and assumes that she derives pleasure from pain. When Sailor recoils, Ichi is confused. He figures that if the bullying element is taken out of the violence, then only pleasure remains for him and his victim. Feeling betrayed by false expectations, he kills Sailor too. (In an interesting aside, a character played by the same actress in MPD-*Psycho* died in an almost identical way: her throat slashed by a teenage killer acting under mind control.)

This scene also sets up Ichi's compatibility with Kakihara, the only character who would be happy to accept Ichi's proposal of a voluntary beating.This division between sadist and masochist not only holds true for them, but also forms the most fundamental definition of all other characters, who are predominantly one or the other. Although most of them are masochists, some strive to be sadists, often as a way to hide their true selves. For example, Kakihara's right-hand man Takayama (Shun Sugata) seems a sadist from the way he commands the group, but he hides his revulsion over his boss' torture tactics and only reveals his true face to his fellow gang member and protege Kaneko (Sabu). In a private moment, Takayama confesses to Kaneko that he might as well have ended up as a salaryman and that this would have made little difference to the way he feels about himself, thus expressing the feeling that he is in a subservient position.

Kaneko in turn is an unmistakeable masochist. A retread of such earlier failed characters as Rainy Dog's Yuji, *Full Metal Gokudô's* Keisuke and *Visitor Q*'s Kiyoshi, he is a former

Kakihara and friends: Takayama (Shun Sugata, l.) and Kaneko (Sabu, r.)

policeman kicked off the force after losing his gun. Then his wife left him too, leaving him — in another parallel with Rainy Dog's protagonist-with their 12-year old son Takeshi (Hiroyuki Kobayashi). Kaneko's failures have therefore made him an outcast, who found his group unit only through more failure, when Takayama saved him from a beating by another gangster in an alleyway. inducted into the Anjo group at Takayama's request, he is an outcast there too, the subject of ridicule due to being an ex-cop who lost his gun but is now supposed to function as expert marksman gangster (here again we see Miike's use of irony as a tool to define characters rather than as an end unto itself). Kaneko's attempts to overcome his failure, and to go from masochist to sadist, are suitably weak. Decked out in black leather, he looks uncomfortable instead of cool and while he's keen to show off his prowess with a gun, he never gets a chance to use it. At one point in the film he meets Ichi, under circumstances very similar to his own rescue at the hands of Takayama: Kaneko saves him from a beating by a strip club bouncer (played by the film's screenwriter Sakichi Satô), not knowing the young man is the murderer he's looking for. Kaneko treats Ichi to a meal, just like Takayama did for him, but his words of encouragement for the young man sound feeble, as if he doesn't believe them himself. In the end, Kaneko leaves him to fend for himself.

The ex-cop's personality is mirrored by that of his son Takeshi, who is the victim of bullying by three classmates. Fittingly, he too has an encounter with Ichi, but in Takeshi's case the meeting is life-altering. By kicking one of the underage bullies in the stomach Ichi inspires the boy to start defending himself and quickly Takeshi is in touch with his own sadistic side. Unlike his father, he changes from masochist to sadist during the course of the film, a process

Left: Karen meets a plain-clothes Ichi (Nao Ômori).
Right: The mastermind Jijii (Shinya Tsukamoto, I.) at work

that reaches its completion in the finale, when he is once again confronted with Ichi and he uses violence against the very same person who triggered the change in him.

Another character who tries but fails to overcome her own personality and go from masochist to sadist is Karen (Alien Sun), a hostess in one of the clubs in Kabukichô controlled by the Anjo group. What motivates her to deny her personality is her love for Kakihara (she is the only person to call Kakihara by his first name Masa), whose methods she admires without question, like a love-struck schoolgirl. Hearing of Anjo's disappearance, she helps Kakihara in his search, in an attempt to get closer to him. After the confirmation of the boss' death arrives, Karen tries even harder to gain Kakihara's favour and joins him in torturing a reluctant informant. This gives Kakihara the impression that he may have found a suitable partner, but the truth reveals itself when he invites her to beat him. Asking for more and harder punches while she smacks him repeatedly in the face, he asks for more than she is able to give and calls it off with a curt "You're not the one." Through these experiences she not only loses the man she loves, but is confronted with how much she was willing to deny herself in order to get him. The disillusionment greatly influences the way she behaves after that, giving her a vulnerability that lets her almost voluntarily fall victim to Jijii and Ichi.

The one exception to *Ichi* the *Killer's* cast of clearly defined characters is Jijii. While it's clear what he wants-the total annihilation of the Anjo group in the most humiliating way possible (which in fact makes him the film's biggest sadist) — why he wants this remains an enigma. His motivation, as well as his exactfunction and his relation to the other characters (including Ichi) is never explained. This seeming (and seemingly blatant, since he could be considered the story's main villain) discrepancy is in fact the most crucial clue as to the film's true intent.

The function of Jijii is to be found in what he does, not in why he does it. To ask why is beside the point. He is a manipulator, the man who pulls the strings and determines the flow of the other characters' lives, either by proxy (through Ichi) or occasionally in person. He is in many ways a godlike being (his all-powerful nature is illustrated visually in the one

scene in which he interferes in person: confronting Takayama, Jijii undresses to reveal the body of a champion weightlifter). In cinema however, there is only one godlike being, who controls all the characters and determines their lives, and that is the director. Jijii's function here is to serve as the director's alter ego. His manipulation of the other characters in the end serves the purpose of manipulating the audience, in other words the function of Jijii equals that of the director.

This relationship is most directly apparent in Jijii's treatment of Ichi. Ichi's costume, a padded leather suit with a large yellow '1' (pronounced *ichi* in Japanese) on the back, is reminiscent of the costume of a superhero, complete with emphasised masculine build and a logo. A hero, in its literary function, is a character who does good deeds by evil means (i.e. the use of violence) and who provides the audience with a source for (often vicarious) identification. Ichi however, uses those evil means, but does no good deeds. He looks like a hero and uses the same methods, but the hero's justification for his violence is missing. Thanks to Jijii's manipulation, he becomes a perversion of the hero figure. The first time we see him is in the scene where he spies on the beating of Sailor. We see him from a distance and from the back. What catches the viewer's eye is his logo, establishing the connection with the hero figure. This set-up is further expanded by the situation, which is straight from a superhero comic book and creates the expectation that the hero will rescue the damsel in distress. But instead he is revealed as a voyeur, who gets off on seeing people hurt and humiliated. In parallel with the way Jijii has robbed him of his individuality and any semblance of heroism, with this scene Miike the director robs the audience of its identification figure. Here, the parallel between Jijii and the director is established.

But this scene is only the first step in a process aimed at making the audience question its own attitude towards the viewing of violence. By depriving them of one identification figure, Miike effectively forces them to side with the other: Kakihara. In this context, Kakihara's masochism gains a new dimension. While we've seen that most characters are masochistic in nature, none of them take pleasure in it the way Kakihara does. He undergoes pain with glee and revels in violence, making the connection between him and the audience, who consume the violence in the film not unlike he does, a suitable one. It's also an intentional one: when Ichi cuts Sailor's pimp in half from head to crotch or slices up a group of gangsters, covering the room in body parts and blood, at those moments Miike wants us to laugh and go "Wow!" In fact he provokes it through the style he employs in these scenes. Their explicitness, exaggeration, and the use of CGI and special effects renders the violence in these scenes harmless. The explicitness makes them darkly comic instead of painful or offensive. When Kakihara pours hot oil over the defenceless Suzuki, it's not an act of violence but one of the directors trademark kitchen jokes, since the protagonist used that oil to fry shrimp just seconds earlier.

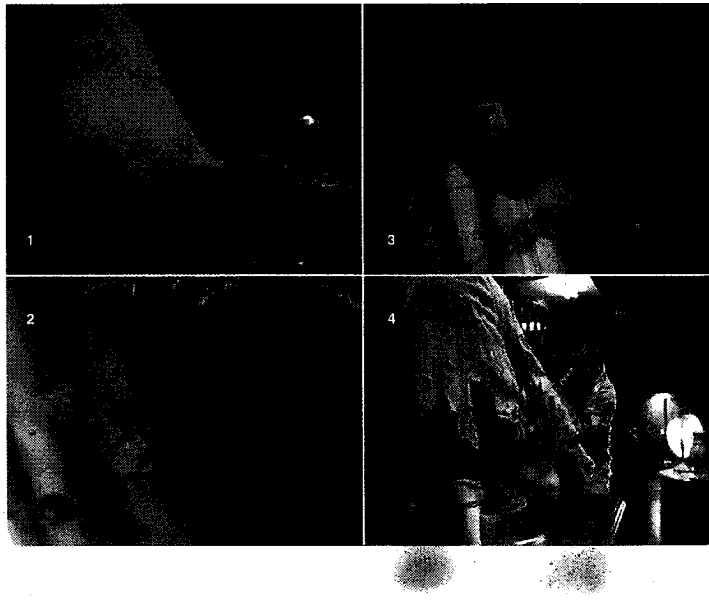
Unlike the dark comedy such jokes created out of violence in *Shinjuku Outlaw, Fudoh* and Dead or *Alive,* in *Ichi* the *Killer* they serve a higher purpose. Right after we laugh or let out that collective Wow!" we are smacked square in the face for it, because Miike alternates this 'playful' violence with 'painful' violence; violence that has a much stronger and much less pleasurable impact on the viewer (the switching between these two could be seen as a variation on the juxtaposition-based style of *Dead* or *Alive* and *Full* Metal *Gokudô).* Right after we chuckle over Jijii and his men slipping on a floor covered in blood and entrails, we are forced to sit through the beating and rape of Sailor, which is anything but playful. Here too it's

Miike's style that forces this reaction in the viewer and interestingly the stylistic approach is the complete opposite of the comical violence. instead of explicitness he opts for suggestion and instead of special effects he employs montage and sound to achieve the desired effect, expanding upon the work he did in this area in the finale of ***Audition.***

The two scenes of beating and rape of Sailor never show the physical impact of fists or feet on the woman's body, instead either letting them take place off screen or suggesting the impact through choice of camera angle or by cutting away just before the impact to its direct aftermath. In a later scene where a woman's nipples are sliced off with a small hobby knife, the blade is never seen touching flesh. This particular sequence consists of four shots (see the illustrations below):

1. The first is a close-up of the woman's breast on a metal tabletop, the nipple stretched out with a clamp.
2. The second is a close shot of the knife as it slides out of its sheathe and taps the metal surface.
3. The third shot is slightly wider, a medium close-up, seen from above, of the hand holding the knife scratching across the table towards the breast. At the moment when knife and flesh are supposedly about to touch, Miike cuts to the fourth shot.
4. A wide shot of Jirô (Suzuki Matsuo), the culprit, standing on the table, his arm making the last movement of what is supposed to have been the cutting, away from either breast.

This montage suggests the movement of the knife across the table and through the flesh but never shows it. The sound effects of the knife scraping across the metal surface of the table helps the audience fill in the blanks.



By using suggestion, Miike implicates the audience in the violence. The violence the viewer purports to have seen took place not on the screen but in his or her own head. The viewer creates and decides for himself the intensity of the violence in these scenes. If it shocks the viewer, then to all intents and purposes the viewer is shocked by his own imagination. The viewer fills in the blanks and is provoked into finding violence inside himself, violence that is more painful and disturbing than anything Miike explicitly shows in the film, because each individual viewer decides the intensity of it for himself.

It's not a coincidence that many of the victims in these 'painfully' violent scenes are women. The use of female characters in these scenes forms part of the provocation of the audience. Since women are regarded as weaker, more fragile and less able to defend themselves than men, their presence as victims adds to the impact the scene makes on the audience.This is a matter of filmmaking technique, it has nothing whatsoever to do with ideology and can therefore not be considered misogynist. Particularly when the filmmaker's intention is to make the viewer question the uncritical consumption of violent images.This leaves no room for misogyny, since it would contradict the intent.

The director's intentions and the role of Jijii as his alter ego therein come to a head in the film's finale. The film builds up to this scene with the promise of a showdown between Kakihara and Ichi. Although it whets the audience's appetite for more violence, what it delivers is something else entirely. Set on a rooftop, the scene does indeed pitch Ichi against Kakihara, but the showdown Kakihara and the audience hope for doesn't come. This is the final provocation on the part of the director (towards the audience) as well as Jijii (towards Kakihara). Just as the confrontation starts, its interrupted by Kaneko. who with Kakihara is the last surviving member of the Anjo gang. Learning from his son that the man his group

Kakihara wears his scars with pride.

had been looking for is the same who taught Takeshi to fight, and misunderstanding Kakihara's wish to be killed by Ichi as the ultimate masochistic kick, he interferes and points his gun at Ichi. Hypnotised by Jijii into believing that Kaneko is his older brother who bullied him as a child, Ichi confronts Kaneko instead, leaving Kakihara behind, alone and jealous.

Ichi slashes Kaneko's throat and receives a bullet in the foot from the ex-cop in return. Now Ichi is down on the ground, unable to use his leg to kick or even walk. Takeshi starts kicking him as he lies there helpless and crying. Ichi has become the opposite of Kakihara's ideal sadist, and the protagonist watches the scene In despair, yelling: "There's nobody left to kill me." To get rid of the symbol of his disillusionment – the sound of Ichi's crying – Kakihara sticks the needles he was fighting Ichi with into his own ears. A CGI shot shows the needles ehtering, piercing his ear drums and moving even further inside: there's no one left to hurt him, so he does it himself. Like the cutting of his own tongue, the piercing of his eardrums is masturbation, which here underlines his disappointment.

The sound of Ichi's cries fades and disappears over a close-up of Kakihara's face, from which the frustration disappears at the same time. The next shot is of extreme importance in the context of the finale: we suddenly see Ichi standing upright, with Takeshi's decapitated head in his hand. This is a very unexpected turn of events, almost a rupture, given what has gone on just seconds before. But the shot of Ichi holding Takeshi's head is subjective, it's a point-of-view shot through the eyes of Kakihara, and therefore the degree of narrative 'truth'is dubious.This shot and the ones that follow are in fact visions of Kakihara's own imagination, the masturbation fantasy he wishes would come true: Ichi comes up to him despite a wounded foot, swings up his leg and buries his blade in Kakihara's forehead. Kakihara falls back, onto the ledge and after swinging precariously back and forth he loses his balance and plummets to his death, yelling "Wow, this is great!" before crashing to the ground below.

The point-of-view shot is not the only indication that what we see is in fact the product of Kakihara's imagination. Right after he hits the ground, Jijii appears from the shadows to inspect Kakihara's body and we see that the cut of the blade in the protagonists forehead is no longer there. Next, Miike cuts to a shot of Takeshi, Still very much alive and kicking the stuffing out of the wounded Ichi on the roof. Also, the movement of Kakihara falling back from the impact of Ichi's kick and his position on the ledge don't gel. The position of the body in the first shot is incompatible with that in the second. Although he imagined Ichi overcoming his own pain to give him the death he so desired, the visual information we are given suggests that Kakihara in fact climbed onto the ledge and jumped off the roof himself, committing suicide (or in his case masturbating, like the needles in the ears and the knife through the tongue) out of frustration and loneliness. His ideal sadist partner lay on the ground crying and unable to defend himself against a child; the finale is a complete deception for Kakihara, who gets nothing he wanted or hoped for. This is illustrated by the shot that ends the sequence: a flashback to the aftermath of his equally disappointing coupling with Karen, in which we see him sitting amidst his hooks and chains, isolated, a vision of utter loneliness.

This disillusionment is of course exactly what Jijii wanted. Not only is the Anjo group destroyed, each of its members died a miserable death. Even his greatest challenge, Kakihara, a man who *wanted* to die painfully, didn't get the satisfaction he wanted from his demise.

Dreams come true for Kakihaa as he finally confronts Ichi on a Shinjuku rooftop.

This is where the parallel between Jijii and the director (and between Kakihara and the audience) is most apparent: like Kakihara, its identification figure, the audience did not get what it wanted from the finale. Miike frustrates them the way Jijii frustrates Kakihara. There was no big showdown, no ultimate act of exciting violence. Instead there was disillusionment. But for the viewer to feel disillusioned over the finale is for him or her to acknowledge the wish to consume violence. In his game of chess with the audience, this is Miike's checkmate: just like Kakihara's craving for pain ended up self-destructive, so did the viewers wish for violence turn against himself.

With Kakthara's death so clearly demarcating the end of the game between filmmaker and audience, the denouement that follows becomes all the more interesting. Opening on a sunny sky, the camera pans down, past a tree from whose branch, with a rope around his neck, hangs none other than Jijii. Below in the streets, a class of elementary school children pass, then a young man in his late teens. The young man is roughly the same age Ichi was, but at first we are unable to make out whether or not he is Ichi. Then, in the film's final shot, the young man turns around to face the camera in a medium close-up. It's not Ichi, which leads to the inevitable conclusion that it's Takeshi, the only other survivor of these events, several years after it all happened.

Trying to interpret this scene on the level of the characters is bound to fail. Again, there is a lack of motivation concerning Jijii. Did he kill himself or did somebody else hang him, maybe in an attempt to make his death look like a suicide? Was the person who killed him then Takeshi, taking revenge for the death of his father? If so, how did he find out that Jijii was behind it when the two never met at any point during the film? And why then is Takeshi's facial expression so neutral instead of hateful or relieved?

Cry-baby killer: Ichi sobs his way through the final duel.

There are no satisfactory answers to these questions to be found in the film, just like the earlier questions of what motivated Jijii and where all his muscles came from. To ask these questions is futile, because they are beside the point. As stated above, the death of Kakihara marks the end of the director's game with the audience, and therefore of the directors function. The same goes for the character of Jijii, the director's alter ego, who has achieved his goals and is also without function as a result. His body hanging from the tree is the acknowledgement and the visual illustration of this end. The role of the director has been played out, it's over for him and his alter ego, and it's up to audience to make up its mind and draw its conclusions. Just like Takeshi walks away to an unknown destination and an unknown future, the viewer moves on to a conclusion only he or she knows. Like the viewer, Takeshi has been amidst the violence and has observed it. He might have been influenced by it, but to which extent no one can say. Least of all the director, who leaves Takeshi and thus the viewer to make up their own minds. Takeshi's neutral expression is the director's acknowledgement that from this point on, it's out of his hands.

Ichi the Killer shows us Takashi Miike as a master of his own art. The film is not only an exploration into the possibilities of cinema, both on the level of form and content, but it's also a critical examination of the medium and of the interaction between the moving image and the spectator. The film as a whole is a completely cohesive unity, in that all of its parts are absolutely crucial to the functioning of the whole. Any attempt at censorship or toning down the violence will have the opposite effect and will in fact make the film *more* exploitative and thereby undermine its critical stance. Excising scenes of violence, particularly the 'painful' scenes, will harm the symbiosis between the 'playful' and the 'painful' violence, which

forms the basis for Miike's critical approach. One forms the context in which the other can function. In the version of the film that was released in Hong Kong, both scenes of the rape and beating of Sailor and the cutting of the woman's nipples were taken out by the censor. These are three crucial scenes, without which the entire effect the film has on the audience changes drastically: because it leaves only the 'playful' violence intact, the film now only lets the audience indulge itself in consuming violence, with no moment left for critical reflection.

But for all the director's expert manipulation of the medium of cinema, the approach he takes runs one risk that can undo the effect he's trying to achieve: boredom.The violence in *Ichi the* Killer is omnipresent and therefore potentially repetitive. The repetition of violence is very much a part of the director's intentions, since it underlines its futility. The very premise on which all the characters' actions are based is futile: the search for a man who is already dead. From that moment on, the violence forms a downward spiral in which one act of violence provokes another, never coming any closer to a resolution for any of the characters and instead ending in death for nearly all of them. The repetition inherent in this process is therefore intentional as a way to show its futility (this ties in with the unmasking of the facade of power that goes on throughout the film, with an entire yakuza group destroyed by a teenage cry baby who himself ends up beaten up by a little boy), but it runs the risk of creating overkill and resulting in tedium that undoes any effect the director wishes to achieve.

For the most part, however, the extreme reactions the film received are a testament to the success of Miike's approach. The violence in the film was strongly denounced by many, a reaction that implies that viewers did reflect on their consumption of violence and set their own boundaries as a result.

DEAD OR ALIVE – FINAL

2002

Reuniting Miike with the star combo of Show Aikawa and Riki Takeuchi, the third instalment of the *Dead* or *Alive* series again features a completely different storyline than its precursors. But despite its different story and characters, *Dead or Alive – Final* most certainly acknowledges its relationship to the two preceding films.

Like *Ichi the Killer* and *Visitor C?, Dead* or *Alive-Final* is very conscious of its medium. Unlike those two earlier films, which blended form and content with clear intentions, here form and content are entirely separated.There is hardly any relationship between the two, making *Dead* or *Alive – Final* play almost like two separate films. One, on the level of content, is another exploration of Miike's thematic process (albeit with some interesting alterations). The other, on the level of form, expresses the acknowledgement of what the title of the film alludes to, that this is the last of the *Dead* or *Alive* films, thus making the film conscious of its status as a sequel and thereby as a film. The opening shot is of a film projector being started up, followed by what it is showing: a montage of scenes from a black and white Chinese martial arts fantasy film. This sequence unmistakably announces the cinema-conscious nature of *Dead or Alive – Final.*

The thematic part of the film starts at the same time, with a voice-over accompanying the film footage telling of how the word 'future' was once equal to hope, but that children these days no longer know this. "Should I tell them?" the voice continues, "Yes, I should. It's up to us to live." This message expresses the happiness the film's characters search for. *Dead* or *Alive – Final* is set in the year 2346, when Yokohama has become a totalitarian city-slate, closed off from the outside world which, as protagonist Ryo (Show Aikawa) tells us, consists only of "sand and wind." Interestingly, the film was shot in today's Hong Kong, using little more than its dilapidated apartment Mocks to create a vision of the future (although the first establishing shot shows a giant zeppelin in the shape of a dragon passing over the buildings, with the film's title lighting up on the huge video screen hanging underneath it).

The use of this particular location is not merely a gimmick or a way to save having to build expensive sets. The setting ties in with the structure of the society portrayed in the film, in which Chinese is the dominant cultural influence. Most inhabitants of this future Yokohama speak Cantonese, which brings to mind the situation portrayed in The City of Lost Souls, in which the Japanese were forced into the position of outcasts in their own country. But although only two characters in the film (those played by Aikawa and Takeuchi) speak Japanese, everyone understands each others language, whether it be Cantonese, Japanese, English or, on one occasion, sign language.

Miike'straditionalformsof rootlessness, those basedonculture andethnicity, no longer apply to the situation he creates here. With everyone understanding every language, cultural barriers have fallen and ethnic identity no longer plays a role. For most of the film's running time, there is only one rootless character: the protagonist Ryo, whose rootlessness resides in the fact that while he looks human, he is in fact a robot (in a nod to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner,* the film uses the term replicant). Ryo is the last remnant of the war that ravaged the land and now moves among humans, passing as one of them, though

without making any attempt to keep his identity a secret: immediately after arriving in Yokohama, he uses his superhuman powers to save a boy from the government militia led by Honda (Takeuchi).

His being a robot brings to mind full Metal *Gokudô* and its protagonists physiological rootlessness. But Ryo is in many ways a combination of Miike's various forms of rootlessness. Like the ethnically rootless, he is of a different kind while outwardly looking like everyone else. Like the geographically rootless he comes from a faraway land. Like the physiologically rootless his powers make him incompatible with others. It's this combination, plus the fact that he is the only surviving member of his species, that makes him an outcast. But despite this status he has no dreams of finding a better world, no happiness he searches for. Having spent much of his life taking part in a war and the rest wandering from one isolated town to the next, he replies "There is no such place" when a member of the group he joins tells him she searches for a better world for her still unborn child to grow up in. Ryo's words echo the message given to the young Riichi in *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai - Bôkyô* and express the realisation that to dream of better places is futile and that the here and now must be seized.

Even Ryo's joining a small band of resistance fighters happens only through circumstance, as a result of saving the boy from the government militia. The group does however consist of fellow outcasts, a small number of people that oppose the dictatorial rule of Yokohama's mayor Wu (Richard Cheung), who forces all his citizens - save a select few - to take a birth control drug, effectively outlawing children and families. The group is led by the young couple Fong (Terence Yin) and June (Josie Ho), the latter being the elder sister of the boy Ryo saved, as well as being pregnant with Fong's child. These rebels' goal of creating a better world is a search for happiness in childhood, although the nostalgia here is for the future, not the past: they fight not for themselves, but for the future of their child.

This idealism is largely limited to Fong and June, however. The bond between the members is a fragile one, with most of the hangers-on expressing their true motivation by their constant demands to get paid for their services. Tensions between them and the two young leaders are high, and the infighting is an indication of which way this group unit will head. An attempt to kidnap Wu fails when the others take to robbing bystanders. June tries to stop them, giving Wu's men the opportunity to fight back. The group is forced to beat a hasty retreat and escape in a school bus, inside which still sits one little boy -the son of Wu's enforcer Honda. Tempers flare again over the failed mission and the argument turns violent, with Ryo coming to Fong and June's aid. The robot catches the bullet fired at him with his bare hand and kicks it through the gunman's skull, thus making the group's first victim.

When Wu agrees to release a number of imprisoned rebels in exchange for the safe return of Honda's son, he forces two of the prisoners to betray their fellow rebels by taking away the baby the couple gave birth to in jail. When the group is re-united, the pair pull out automatic weapons and fire them at their friends. The entire group unit is laid to waste, except for June, who was protected by Fong jumping between her and the bullets. The couple pulls the trigger because they value the safety of their child over their loyalty to the group. Their motivation is the same as that of Fong when he steps in front of June to protect her and their unborn child. What destroys the group is the same thing it fights for: the wish to see children brought up in safety.

This moment underlines that everything that happens in the film revolves around the value of the child, meaning that the childhood idyll takes a central position in the narrative. For Honda, the kidnapping of his son is the start of a change of heart. After the massacre among the rebels, he sets free another imprisoned couple expecting their first child, explaining his decision to Wu as an attempt to replace the dead with new life. Wu is none too taken with his lieutenants newfound compassion and when Honda returns home that night he finds his wife convulsing on the floor. When she starts to short-circuit, he realises that his wife was also a replicant. Not only her, but also his son Takeshi and, as Wu tells him when Honda angrily storms in for an explanation, Honda himself too.

With this realisation Honda becomes a physiologically rootless character: he suddenly discovers himself to be a robot where he believed he was human. Everything he believed in, including his own identity, turns out to have been false. Interestingly, his mental development takes the opposite route: from obedient and emotionless when he was human, to compassionate and human now that he is a robot. After a final kiss, he frees his wife from her electronic suffering by switching her off, but leaves Takeshi be. The boy remains unaware and unaffected, fitting in with the importance (and the invulnerability) given to children.

Simultaneously, Ryo, June and June's little brother hide out on a deserted beach (a situation strongly reminiscent of *Rainy Dog*). When June asks Ryo to teach her to shoot a gun so she can continue Fong's struggle, he tells her she has a much more important task to fulfil: to bring her unborn child into the world.

Although this reply could be interpreted as male chauvinism, relegating the female character to the function of mother and disallowing her all other purpose, two other scenes in the film contradict this reading. First there is Maria, Honda's rookie assistant who is a better fighter than any of his trained soldiers and who successfully convinces her sceptic (and, yes, chauvinist) commander of her abilities. Secondly, the scene in which Honda sets free the couple expecting their first child emphasises the fact that having and raising children is a matter of both mother and father. Interrogating the couple, Honda asks them what their plans are, but after each answer keeps asking "And then?" He forces them to think of how they will raise their child together and how to support him as he grows up. As on previous occasions in his work, Miike's characters have their own individual worldviews, none of which is representative of a dominant ideology as expressed by the director.

The function of Ryo's remark has nothing to do with male chauvinism, but ties in firstly with the importance of the child that lies at the heart of the narrative and secondly with Ryo's belief that June's wish to escape to a better place is futile. He merely reminds her that what is in the here and now (her child) is a much more pressing matter than a dream of a distant and abstract better world. Miike underlines this through the use of the seaside setting. June previously told Ryo that she would be prepared to go "to the end of the world" to find that better place. The sea demarcates this end (with a black, thundering sky on the horizon for good measure), just as it did in *Shinjuku* Outlaw, *Rainy* Dog, and particularly in *Ley Lines*, *The* City of *Lost* Souls and the childhood scenes of Dead or *Alive* 2. June at first is still so obsessed with finding her utopia that she teaches herself to swim, but it's when Ryo reminds her of her child that her attitude starts to change. It's through this change that she finds at least part of what she searches for within herself. The secluded beach becomes her better world, free from Wu's interference, with her unborn child, her little brother and a substitute father for the both of them at her side. Her realisation is complete when she declares her

love for the robot. This has less to do with physical attraction to Ryo than with acknowledging the futility of her search. The declaration makes her share Ryo's attitude towards making the best of the situation she is in.

June's words are also effectively where the narrative of Dead *or Alive* ➡ *Final* ends. The finale that follows, which pits Ryo against Honda in an ultimate battle of replicants, has no purpose within that narrative and is also rather illogical given the changes in Honda (which undo his role as antagonist) and the lack of animosity in Ryo. The finale, from a narrative point of view, is useless. However, that its function has nothing to do with the rest of the narrative is made clear in the scene's opening moments, which consist of flashbacks to Dead *or* Alive and *Dead or* Alive 2. The finale is a matter of form rather than content. Form in fact takes over from content and as noted above, the form of *Dead or Alive* ➡ *Final* is conscious of cinema, even acknowledging the film's status as a sequel.

The finale sees Aikawa and Takeuchi (since they are effectively no longer their characters but themselves) engaging in a lengthy hand-to-hand battle, which like many of the action scenes in the film are executed in the style of a Hong Kong martial arts film. The use of this style points to the fact that Dead *or Alive* ➡ *Final's* tine-consciousness above all refers to genre cinema or more precisely popular cinema, as established with the footage of martial arts fantasy films in the opening sequence. With this, Miike seems to acknowledge that his own films are exactly that: popular, rather than artistic, cinema. It's a celebration perhaps even more than an acknowledgement, as illustrated by the fact that the characters of June's brother and Honda's son both love watching old films. The two boys establish their friendship by each taking several frames from one of those martial arts fantasy films they watch in an old deserted movie theater. Their dreams are in cinema, thus providing the one link between form and content in this film (see also the combination of the voice-over and the film footage in the opening sequence, which links cinema with future and hope).

Dead or Alive ➡ *Final* is therefore one of Miike's most post-modern films, self-referential to the point of mythologizing. This isn't a new development in the *Dead or Alive* series. The opening shot of Aikawa and Takeuchi sitting side-by-side in the first film, giving a "1,2. . . 1,2,3,4!" count before the opening montage kicks in, also served to mark the occasion of their first collaborative screen appearance as actors. Even the denouement of *Dead or Alive* 2, with the protagonists defying death and continuing to live while riddled with bullets, could be interpreted as a nod to the on-screen star power. But neither of these sequences are as blatant as the attempts at mythologizing in *Dead* or *Alive* ➡ *Final.* Particularly in the film's finale, which starts with Aikawa exclaiming "It smells familiar in here somehow. Like my mother." With these words, the association between the empty hangar they are in and the womb is quickly made. What follows is not a battle, but more a good-natured, boys-will-be-boys brawl. This ends in what is suspiciously similar to a ferttlisation and birth, when the two opponents collide and melt into one ball of light, to emerge as a single new being: a giant robot self-referentially equipped with wings and the name "DOA 2001 Model". When the creature's head is revealed to be that of a penis, this leaves only one, admittedly inevitable, conclusion: it's a boy.

Although Miike keeps the self-referencing fairly subtle until he gets to the finale, with minor, playful references to for instance *Rainy Dog* (the stay on the beach, Wu calling Honda his son, the slide guitar used on the soundtrack), and *Ichi the Killer* (one of the rebels wears a waistcoat with a yellow '1' on the back), the post-modern approach occasionally gives

way to simply appropriating elements from other directors' films. The use of the tem 'replicant' could be forgiven, but the scenes of Ryo seeing bullets approach in slow motion, for example, is rather too uncomfortably similar to the effects work in the Wachowski Brothers' The Matrix, a film from which Miike appropriated elements in a far more imaginative way in the cockfight sequence of The City of Lost Souls. Content-wise too the film has some problems, notably in the character of Wu. He is set up with an interesting motivation, his wish to ban childbirth relates to his being gay and his belief that true love is only found in homosexual relationships. Heterosexuality, he says, is only a tool for procreation. As the story progresses, little is done with his psychology and he gradually reverts to being a stereotypical, cackling megalomaniac.

Taken as a whole, Dead or ***Alive*** *– Final* is certainly of interest within the framework of Miike's oeuvre. In the end though, it emerges as too much of an in-joke and not enough of a fully developed film.

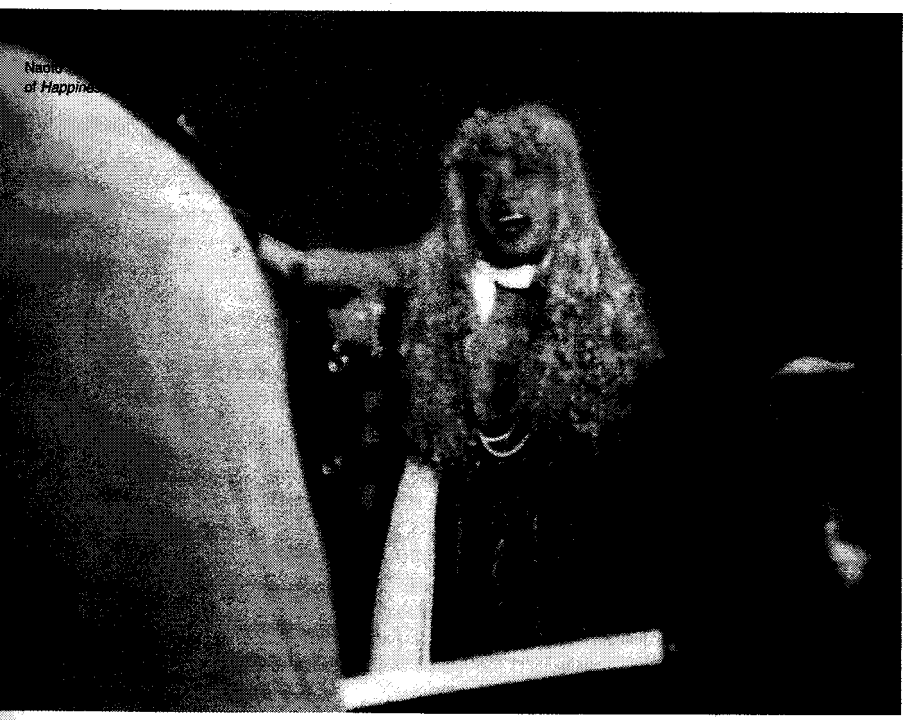
THE HAPPINESS OF THE KATAKURIS

Katakurike No Kofuku

2002

Although based on the Korean film *The Quiet Family, The Happiness of the Katakuris* is in many ways a direct successor to Visitor *Q.* Like that film, it is a portrait of a disintegrated family moving back towards unity. The difference is that in *The Happiness of the Katakuris* the family members are aware of their situation and make a conscious effort to rebuild the unit themselves. As the title indicates, their aim is to find happiness.

As a result the degree of the family's disintegration is also a lot less drastic than in *Visitor* Q. After all, if the characters are conscious of their situation, then they wouldn't let it spiral as far out of control as their more ignorant counterparts in ***Visitor Q.*** In that sense, we can't really speak of disintegration, but more of a group whose ties are tested by a succession of setbacks. The reasons for this family's misfortune are external, not the result of their own behaviour.



The Happiness of the Katakuris also harks back to *The Guys from Paradise* in that the setbacks are largely economic in nature. Here too, the characters need to learn to step beyondthelureof moneyandeconomicsuccessinordertofind happiness, which, like in Visitor *Q*, lies in the family unit itself. Happiness here is found in the love for and of one's kin. It's not gender-based or role-based like in *Visitor* Q and the film therefore seems less directly an example of social comment.

This is deceiving, however. *The Happiness of the Katakuris* certainly doesn't exist in a social vacuum, what with the strong effects of economic developments on the characters' lives. References to the burst of Japan's bubble economy are rife. Indeed, it's the major source of the family's misfortune, starting with father Masao Katakuri (Kenji Sawada) losing his employment at a department store and son Masayuki (Shinji Takeda) getting fired from his job as a stock broker. Masayuki became a pickpocket and spent time in prison. His sister Shizue (Naomi Nishida) was dumped by her husband, who trotted off with a high school student and left her with their daughter Yurie.

Father Masao is the catalyst of the reconstruction, having lost his job and therefore his archetypal role as provider for his family (again we see the element of failed masculinity as a motivating factor for the protagonist). Given his role as provider, his belief is that a steady income and economic success will bring back happiness and reunite the family. (There is further reason for him making the link between economy and happiness, because he and his wife Terue (Keiko Matsuzaka) met on the job, as colleagues at the department store).

Masao gambles everything on buying a family-run hotel in the mountains. The guesthouse is located in a remote part of the area, but dad is convinced the tourists will eventuallyarrive in droves becauseofthegovernment'splan to buildaroad up the mountain. To realise this dream, the entire family moves in, including black sheep Masayuki, Shizue and Yurie, plus grandfather Jinpei (Tetsurô Tanba). (In a complete departure with all previous depictions of a family unit of blood relatives in Miike's films, the family depicted in *The Happiness of the Katakuris* is tribal in structure, consisting of four generations of members instead of the customary two. The Japanese word for family, *kazoku*, is written with the characters for 'home' and 'tribe', and the depiction of this particular family structure ties in with the film's suggestion that after the burst of the bubble economy, one needs to completely sever ties with the customs of that era in order to regain happiness – including the custom to remove elders from the family unit.)

The film starts at this point, with the family already reunited (background information is provided in flashbacks). But it's the father's belief in the necessity to reclaim his position as breadwinner that makes him not see what he has. In his wake, his family makes the same mistake, since they themselves have all met with setbacks in their own lives and are in that sense vicariously living off Masao's search for happiness in order to overcome their Own obstacles.

This is a big difference with all previous depictions of the search for happiness in Miike's films. These characters already have their source of happiness, but they don'trealise it. They're so busy trying to reclaim the glories of the past that they don't realise they need to move forward instead. Seen in the light of the film's reference to the collapse of the bubble economy, the director's opinion seems to be that people need to find new ways to live instead Of trying to recapture'the habits of the recent past, since these habits are what led to ruin in the first place.

Naomi Nishida and Kiyoshirô Imawano rehearse their musical number.

The impossibility of the characters' goals is hinted at by a new series of setbacks and bad omens.The land on which the hotel is built was previously an industrial waste dump, a competing guesthouse lower down the mountain is having great success by using trained animals as staff, and a solar eclipse chases off a group of superstitious hikers at the exact moment they want to check in to the family hotel. Symbolic of the nature of these setbacks is the moment when Masao, in a contrived effort to show how happy the family is, enthusiastically jumps on the swing he has constructed in the garden, which then breaks and throws him several meters down the mountain. When the family actually get some guests, these people start dying one by one. The first (Tokitoshi Shiota) commits suicide, while the second, a sumo wrestler, dies of a cardiac arrest while having sex with his teenage mistress in his room (crushing the poor girl under his bulk). As a result the hotel, and the cash register, remain empty. To top it all off, the mountain starts to rumble ominously.

These setbacks are also the family's saving grace, since as a result of them th ey discover their source of happiness. They bury the dead bodies for fear that if they report them to the police, the bad publicity will definitely kill off the chance of having any guests ("If I

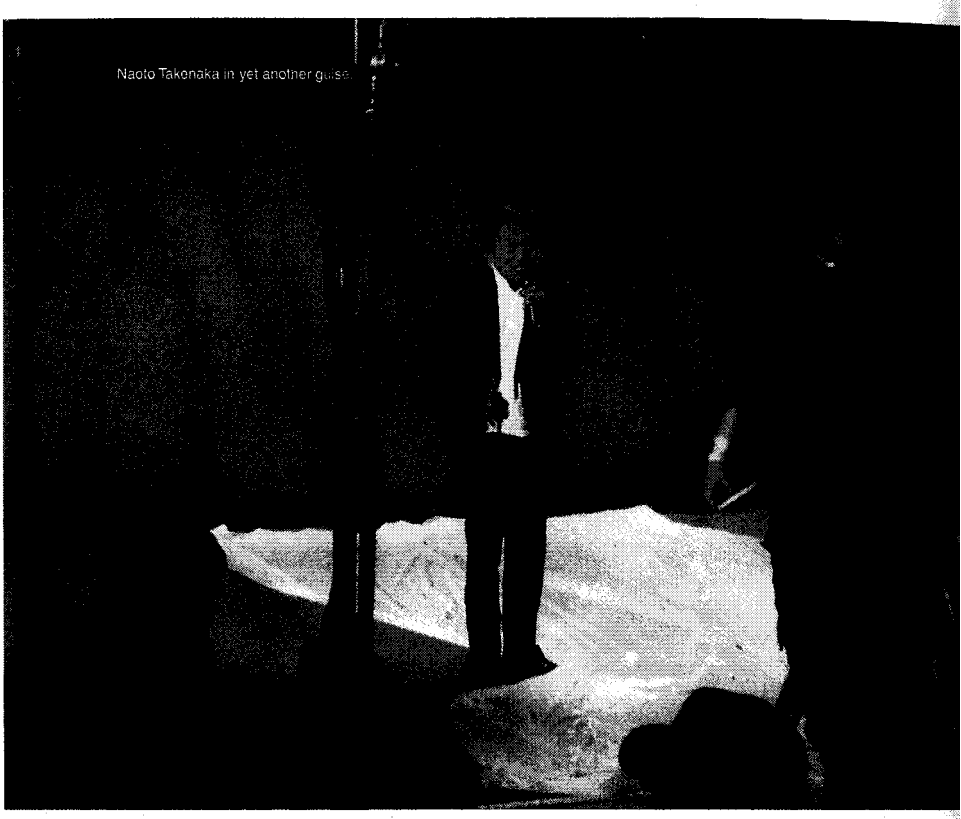
lose this too, I don't know what I'll do," Masao moans, indicating how focused he is on economic gain). Thus, the family is forced to co-operate. Then Shizue falls in love with Richard Sagawa (rock star Kiyoshirô Imawano, Japan's equivalent to Mick Jagger), a man who claims to be the half-British nephew of Queen Elizabeth and a pilot with the US Navy, but who not surprisingly turns out to be a confidence trickster. Despite the obvious signals that Richard is not all he says he is (Imawano even performs the part with a fake stilted, foreign-accented Japanese), Shizue is so lonely she's more than eager to believe him. Grandpa Jinpei sees through his facade and intervenes the moment Richard asks Shizue for money to, he says, fly back to England so he can reclaim his position within the royal family. A fight between the two men ensues, which results in Richard falling off a cliff.

This functions as a turning point in the film. and the beginning of the family's realisation that happiness lies in their own unit. First, a family of guests actually survives the night and leaves happily the next morning. Then, the Katakuris have to rebury the corpses when they hear the location of the road has been changed and that the new construction site will be exactly in the spot where they buried their dead guests. When after pulling off the relocation they hear police sirens approaching, they think their deeds have been discovered. Now they realise how strong the love is they have for each other, when Masao, Masayuki and Jinpei all volunteer to take the fall in order to save the others. When Jinpei finally sacrifices himself, it turns out the police didn't come to arrest them, but to look for a fugitive (who very fittingly murdered his wife). When this turns out to be one of the newly arrived guests (Kenichi Endô), he panics and holds Terue hostage, threatening her with a knife. Now again the Katakuris are confronted with how strongly they feel for each other. Masao pleads to the criminal to let his wife go, but it's Masayuki – the black sheep of the family – who steps in to rescue her (again, by sacrificing himself for the others). He frees his mother and the attacker is arrested, but Masayuki is stabbed in the process. Being about to lose their son makes them fully realise how little financial success means compared to their own lives and their own unity as a family. The fact that Masayuki gets back up on his feet moments after this realisation, confessing he faked the stab wound, means he was out to force his family into this realisation. (His death would also have been in conflict with the film's theme of rebuilding the family unit.)

The family's comprehension of the source of happiness is immediately put to the test when the mountain that had long been rumbling ominously suddenly erupts. Hot lava comes streaming down the side, but the Katakuris manage to help each other to safety and Masayuki even sacrifices himself one more time to save the family dog. With this, their happiness is complete. Their hotel is even saved from destruction, deposited by the lava stream in a sunny green valley, an environment that is the complete opposite of the polluted mountaintop and that is guaranteed to attract clients.

The story of *The Happiness* of *the Katakuris* is narrated by Yurie and it was a good choice to tell it through the eyes of a child. She is the family's most neutral member and being a child Yurie is free of the setbacks, the cynicism and depression the adults suffer from, as well as being immune to the lure of economic success. She can't be influenced or victimised. This is another example of Miike's depiction of the childhood idyll, since the girl is invulnerable to all the things that plague her adult relatives.

The fact that the film is told through a child's eyes also makes it a very obviously stylised film. In this aspect, the approach Miike takes to *The Happiness of the Katakuris* continues on his work in *Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Bôkyô* and *Dead or Alive 2.* Here he



Naoto Takenaka in yet another guise.

employs a visual style derived from a child's own creative expressions. This includes strong use of colours, distortions of reality and an often juvenile approach to comedy. The choice to use claymation for three scenes (the credit sequence, the fight between Richard and Jinpei and the volcanic eruption) was a way to incorporate scenes that would have been too expensive to shoot as live action, but the actual decision to use this animation technique ties in completely with the child's point of view.

The distortion of reality is most apparent in the fact that this film is a musical. The musical is less a genre than a stylistic approach to telling a story and this is exactly how the various interludes function here. While the musical numbers are integrated into the narrative (all serve a narrative function, like Masao singing about 'this road to happiness", which refers to the road that will be constructed to the mountain and which establishes Masao's aim to find happiness through economic success), their choreography is very apparently stylised, to the point of defying the laws of physics.

While the style is very consistently employed throughout the film, on occasion it crosses the line into becoming a free-for-all, giving the director occasion to play around with elements without bothering to make them fit with the chosen approach. Like in *The* Guys *from Paradise,* Naoto Takenaka appears in two brief cameos that serve almost solely to let the actor indulge himself in his clowning. In the first he is a TV presenter reporting on the success of the competing guesthouse, which establishes one of the setbacks endured by the family. But for no apparent reason it ends with a fly crawling up his nose and the actor writhing in agony. His second appearance, in drag as a female singer, is pointless, but like the first it's thankfully too brief to be harmful to the film. More incongruous isthesudden turn intotragedy that is taken during the scene of Terue being held hostage. This isn't a matter of indulgence but rather the opposite: not sticking to the film's tone.

The link between The Happiness *of* the *Katakuris* and Miike's previous work is therefore evident on a stylistic as well as thematic level. Perhaps it wasn't such a strange choice for Miike to make a musical, since this could be seen as a logical extension of the music-led montages that reached their apogee with the opening minutes of *Dead* or *Alive,* as well as of earlier films that featured musical interludes like Blues Harp and most clearly *Andromedia.*

The Happiness of the Katakuris is not only a film that harks back to earlier work, but also a starting point for later developments in Miike's themes. In its references to economic downturn and the effect this has on the characters, it signals the gestation of a thematic trope that would reappear in *Graveyard of Honour* the same year.

5. Stray Dog

It would seem impossible that someone who has made 49 feature films and three television series in eleven years (which is an average of 4.7 productions a year) would have any time left to devote to other activities. Let alone have time to do other jobs. Yet, Takashi Miike has managed to be quite active on the side as well, working as a promo director, actor, producer. editor and magazine columnist.

He made his first and until now only television commercial in 1994 for Chlostanin, a Japanese manufacturer of herbal medicine, food supplements and cosmetics. Even though this is the only commercial he directed, Miike did edit the promotional trailer to Shôhei Imamura's 2001 film *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge* (*Akai Hashi No Shita No Nurui Mizu*). The film was produced by Nikkatsu, who in the same year also distributed *The Guys from Paradise.* The studio publicist, who worked on both films, asked Miike to edit the trailer to Imamura's film, which meant a renewed involvement with his old mentor's work.

The trailer, which opens with a mention of the film's selection for the Cannes Film Festival competition, emphasises the passion between the two lead characters Yôsuke and Saeko (played by Kôji Yakusho and Misa Shimizu), with stronger presence for Saeko. The central point of the film, the fact that she excretes large quantities of water during orgasm, is only hinted at through dialogue and briefly shown in the trailer's final shot, in which she stands in a puddle of her water while shoplifting in a supermarket.

"It was difficult work:' Miike recounts his experience editing the promo."Making a trailer is very different from making a film. A trailer needs to give the audience an impression of what the film is about. The most important thing is that it needs to be impressive. But sometimes I felt I needed a more impressive shot than what Imamura-san had filmed, but of course I didn't have it. That made it difficult?

As far as the trailers for his own films are concerned, Miike edited only the trailer for Agitatorhimself. In an interesting parallel to the Imamura trailer, this promo also puts a good amount of emphasis on the relationship between Kunihiko and his girlfriend, which is only of peripheral importance in the film. After an opening shot of a field of sunflowers, the trailer starts with their love scene and ends with them walking in the rain. Caught in between is a flurry of gunfights, stabbings and car action, all edited to Kôji Endô's bittersweet tango score.

In 1999, Miike suggested to the producer of Shinya Tsukamoto's film Gemini (*Soseiji*) to produce a documentary on the film's production process.The production company behind the film, Sedic International, had previously co-produced *The Bird People in China, Kishiwada Shônen Gurentai – Chikemuri Junjô Hen* and *Andromedia,* and were quite taken with the idea of letting Miike direct a *Making of Gemini.*

"I was very interested in Tsukamoto's method of filmmaking and curious about what the atmosphere on his sets would be like. We once made a film in the same building at the same time and I went down to see him at work. It was very impressive, he was very concentrated but at the same time very fanatic. So with the making-of I was hoping to get to see more."

Since it was impossible for him to attend the entire shooting period, Miike chose to hand recording duties to Seiji Minami. In order to have the cast and crew feel comfortable with Minami's presence, the cameraman remained present for the entire production, effectively as a member of Tsukamoto's crew. He was equipped with a small DV camera, allowing him to move around the set unhindered and have his hands free to help out the Gemini crew.

Only 17 minutes of the documentary were finally included on the Japanese DVD release of *Gemini,* resulting in little more than a generic promotional documentary. However, even at this short length it is clear that Miike's ideas about how to use his cameraman paid off. Minami often films the proceedings from close distance, sometimes sitting between the actors as they rehearse for a scene. Although the DVD is widely available, as a part of Takashi Miike's work the documentary is of interest only to completists.

Somewhat more interesting in this respect is the music video he directed in 2002 for his *Guys from Paradise* star Kôji Kikkawa. Better known as a pop singer rather than as an actor, Kikkawa invited Miike to direct the video for the song *Pandora,* meant to promote the album of the same name. The short film, entitled Go! *Go! Fushimi* Jet (the title is a reference to Kikkawa's character in *The City of* Lost Souls) features the singer as a lone samurai battling a band of graverobbers until the arrival of an armada of flying saucers forces him to shift his attention to a giant extraterrestrial praying mantis. He engages the creature by flying away with a jet pack that suddenly appears on his back.

It's something of a paradox that Miike has not been very active as a director of music videos, considering his love for music-led montages in his films as well as the various scenes in his work structured around musical performances: the set piece for Da Pump in *Andromedia,* the live club performances in *Blues Harp* and of course the musical numbers in *The Happiness of the Katakuris.* Like the montages in his feature films, the editing of Go! *Go! Fushimi Jet* is dictated by the rhythm of the music. The song *Pandora* is an up-tempo rock song and the style follows suit. However, the opening sequence (narrated by Kenichi Endô) is hand-drawn animation. Since this prologue is set in Cuba, the choice to use animation had the same source as that on *The Happiness of the Katakuris,* making a scene possible that would be prohibitively expensive to shoot as live action. The prologue details the discovery of film footage from an old Japanese silent *jidai-geki* called *Go! Go! Fushimi Jet* and the music video mimics silent film in its lack of dialogue and use of intertitles (some of which are used to express onomatopoeic sound effects akin to those in the opening montage of *Blues Harp).* But the idea fizzles out as the setting turns to science fiction and Fushimi Jet has to battle the alien invaders. Thanks to its outlandish combination of disparate elements the video is certainly entertaining, but its multitude of ideas never quite gel into a coherent whole.

Kikkawa and Miike teamed up again later the same year for the music video to the track *The Gundogs*. Again featuring the character of Fushimi Jet, the short is this time set in the yakuza milieu of Osaka in 1970. The two men plan to make a series of Fushimi Jet music videos, to be released on a future compilation DVD. Kikkawa's record company Tokuma Japan Communications distributed the first two music videos on DVD as limited edition packages with the singer's albums. Tokuma is a *large* publication and media distribution firm who also co-produced *Full Metal Gokudô* and The *City of* Lost Souls, and formerly the parent company of Daiei, the studio that produced some of Miike's major works, including the *Kuroshakai* and *Dead* or *Alive* trilogies.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the director has made occasional acting appearances in his own films, notably in *Kenka No Hanamichi, Agitator* and *Graveyard of Honour.* Though mostly limited to cameos or bit parts, Miike also lent his services as an actor to several other directors. His first appearance in front of the camera happened when he was still an assistant director, in Shôhei Imamura's *Black Rain.* In the first act of the film, set in Hiroshima during the immediate aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bomb, a shaven-headed Takashi Miike plays a factory worker in two scenes. In the first he is only seen from the back, but in the second he gets to deliver a few lines of dialogue. "During the war," Miike explains Imamura's reasons for casting him, "the men that stayed home and weren't drafted into the army often had problems with their health. I guess Imamura felt I was one of the most sick looking people on the set, so he gave me that role."

His next appearance in another director's film wouldn't be for another nine years. His former assistant director Takeshi Watanabe (who had worked under Miike from 1991 through 1994[2]) had gone on to do a direct-to-video remake of Yusaku Matsuda's *Go/den Wolf Resurrection* (Yomigaeru *Kinro).* For the 1998 sequel he asked Miike to play the part of a bum who takes in the main character played by Claude Maki.

The part was quite a substantial supporting role with numerous scenes and dialogue. The character wasn't lacking in dramatic substance either: a washed-up former yakuza living on the streets, who takes care of a runaway child even though he knows he's dying of stomach cancer. Receiving fourth billing (under the pseudonym of 'Miike Dokomo'), he acquitted himself quite well and managed to hold his own among a cast of professionals (including Yasushi Kitamura and *Ichi the Killer's* Shun Sugata).

Miike played another homeless character two years later in Toshiyuki Mizutani's horror film *Isola* (*Isola – Taiju Jinkaku Shôjo*, 2000), but his work on the film amounted to little more than being an extra. In a scene featuring Susumu Terajima, Miike can be seen looking on in the background as the actor rips open his jugular vein with a handful of meat skewers.

The fact that Miike ended up as only an extra was not intentional. He had been offered a bigger part, but scheduling problems led to him having to cancel his involvement. "I visited the set to apologise to the director for having cancelled, but Mizutani said: 'Since you're here, you can still be in my film. Just go stand over there in the back for the next shot.'"

The rather surprising choice for his next acting appearance was a soft-core porn video entitled *The Security Women Affair* (*Nikutai Keibiin – Sakareta Seifuku*', 2001). This story of a burglar / rapist who haunts a female security guard was directed by another of Miike's former collaborators, Naoto Kumazawa. who directed the making-of documentary of *The* Guys *from Paradise*[3]. "It was one of Kumazawa's first films. He had trouble casting it, so he asked

for my help. I agreed to play a small part in it and then I went to other actors I knew, saying: 'I'm in this film, why don't you play in it too?' I figured that if I was willing to play a part, the others would have no reason to refuse:'

As a result, the film ended up populated with Miike regulars: Shôko Nakahara played the security guard, Kenichi Endô her lascivious colleague, Kôji Tsukamoto took the part of the rapist and Far-Long Oh was an office worker also lusting after the uniformed Nakahara. Miike himself appeared in only one scene, as a black-suited yakuza who beats up Endô in an alleyway.

The following year, Miike made his debut as a voice actor in the anime adaptation of Hideo Yamamoto's Ichi the Killer. He performed the part of Kakihara, played by Tadanobu Asano in the feature film. Since *Koroshiya 1 The Animation -Episode 0 (2002)* focused largely on the character of Ichi and his origins, Kakihara's screen time is rather limited. After having taken this first stride outside live action film, Miike left Japan behind altogether for his next acting appearance. In Thai director Pen-ek Ratanaruang's Last *Life in the Universe* (2003), Tadanobu Asano plays a man who flees Japan for Bangkok after being involved in the shooting of a gangster. Takashi Miike, complete with punch perm, played a yakuza on Asano's tail. Ratanaruang must have been a fan of Miike's work, because the film also features Riki Takeuchi in a cameo role.

The habit of helping out his collaborators is also the basis of most of Miike's credits as a producer. In 1993 and 1994, he lent a hand to Hisao Maki in producing the five-part *Shinshuwaru* series starring Hakuryû. Based on Maki's own manga series, it's notable only for marking Miike's first collaboration with actor Sabu, who played a supporting role in part three. His other production credits came through Excellent Film, which co-produced numerous Miike films and is the production company behind the long-running V-cinema series *Minami No Teiô.* Counting dozens of episodes, the series stars Ftiki Takeuchi as an Osaka gangster with a heart of gold, who helps people in financial distress. Normally released directly on video, one episode of the series, *Nanba Kinyûden – Minami No Teiô Special Gekijoban* [lit: Tales of financial disaster – king of the South special theatrical edition] was made for theatrical release. On this film Takashi Miike is credited as producer, though the actual work he did on the production was of a very different kind: "My role was to resolve trouble. I was never attached to the project, or involved with the contents of the film. They had problems with the yakuza in Osaka, who wanted to stop the shooting. I happened to be free at that moment, so they asked me to resolve the trouble. I went to Osaka to meet with the yakuza and negotiated with them. Finally, without paying anything, they would leave us to it and we could get on with the film. That was all I did on the film."

In 2001 Takashi Miike made his debut as a *magazine columnist.* The Japanese film monthly CUT asked the director to keep a diary of his experiences during the production of *Ichi the Killer.* Less a diary than a look inside the mind and personality of one filmmaker, Miike's ten-part column is written in a form uncannily similar to that of a screenplay. It deals with everything from the origin of the project through the trials and tribulations of shooting a film in Kabukichô, some interesting thoughts on the film's cast and crew, and finally its troubled international premiere at the Toronto film festival, which took place directly after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. You can read the *Ichi the Killer* production diary in its entirety in the next chapter.

Afterword

Many actors hope to one day participate in a Takashi Miike film Especially guys. They want to go back to being naughty boys and go wild Miike lets them indulge themselves in this fantasy freely and knows exactly how to provoke them. And once provoked, the actors bombard each other with their energy, lifting the film up and spinning it off into higher orbit.

I was also one of those guys who were allowed to indulge themselves. it was a very joyful experience.

Fierce. Nonsensical. Vulgar. Powerful. These are words that could be used to describe Takashi Miike. But without doubt the most essential words are self-assured and clever.

Tsukamoto